

Reading the Farm
in Prairie Literature

By

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine some elements of an agricultural myth in several mid- to late-twentieth-century texts of the Canadian prairie. One of these elements of the agricultural myth is the figure of the farmer and the way it functions as a mediator between nature and our perception of it. I also trace the farmer's domination over, yet subservience to, the land through agriculture and how literature represents that contradiction. The third strand considers the evolution of agriculture to agribusiness. And finally, I trace how all of these ideas are manifested in the agrarian site--the house, barn, field, and garden--and the various movements between and among them. I offer a socially-oriented counterpoint to previous works that have been, on the whole, psychological and thematic, such as Henry Kreisel's and Laurence Ricou's studies. As well, I draw on Robert Thacker's "great prairie fact" and Dick Harrison's focus on writing as a cultural phenomenon in order to position an agricultural myth. My main texts, which I examine in detail, cover an array of genres: Sinclair Ross's *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Robert Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue," and 25th Street Theatre's *Paper Wheat*.

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Reading the Farm in Prairie Literature

Positioning an Agricultural Myth: An Introduction

From the time that early humans began to settle in one place and grow the food that allowed them that stability, we have had agriculture, a term that, by encompassing “culture,” suggests how fundamental, if indirect, is our relationship with growing things. Writers, from Virgil to our contemporaries, have variously represented agriculture and its practitioners as simple, godly, pristine, narrow, bland, noble, practical, pitiable, virtuous, wrong-headed, sustaining, and innocent. The list could go on at some length. From this array of representation springs my desire to investigate how agriculture signifies in my own culture, the Canadian prairie.

Agriculture has become an increasingly meaningful signifying system on the verge of this new century, even as its structures and its viability are being brought radically into uncertainty. Today, rural populations, in places such as the Canadian prairies, are experiencing rapid decline. The traditional farm infrastructure that has, until recently, included grain elevators, the towns that grew up around them, with stores and implement manufacturers, and the farms themselves, is becoming obsolete. In 2001, historian Gerald Friesen notes “that the eight percent of prairie Canadians actually engaged in

farm production cannot be certain that their economic role will even exist a decade from now" ("Defining"19). In the title of Friesen's article, "Defining the Prairies: or, why the prairies don't exist," he provocatively suggests that "prairie" as an imaginative construction, has ceased to have meaning because, in part, the strong agricultural base that gave that term its focus no longer exists.

As a result of rural decline, prairie society, at least superficially, has moved further from agrarian concerns over the last one hundred years. Even though many people are still directly or indirectly involved in the related industries of agribusiness and agrifoods, and even though these endeavors are important to the economy on the prairies, some urban dwellers, if they are so inclined, can pretend in 2001 that agriculture simply does not exist, that steaks spontaneously come into being encased in styrofoam and plastic wrap, and that vegetables cunningly arrange themselves into aesthetically-pleasing displays in markets; never having been in intimate and dirty contact with the earth or some actual person on a farm. And yet, though it might seem anachronistic to talk about the connection between agriculture and literature in a highly industrial and technological time, the reality is that agriculture, in its many configurations, is a residual experience that continues to shape our literature because we continue to believe in versions of an agricultural myth. And, living as we do in times of great agricultural stress, that agricultural myth becomes a

particularly complex and, at times, compelling signifier.

Contemporary agriculture, throughout much of the world, the Canadian prairies included, instead of flourishing in a mechanically sophisticated age, is struggling against unknowable economics that threaten to make farming as a way of life obsolete. Lois L. Ross writes that the “overwhelming problem is that most farmers are now living on less, paying more for everything, and borrowing more than ever before in an effort to stay afloat” (6). As she says, one reason that farm income has not kept pace with output costs is “that grain prices are tied to a monopolized international market” (7) whose first priority is profit for (often foreign) investors and not the sustainability of prairie agriculture.

The prairie farm is, and always has been, a fundamentally ambiguous place. It is where human beings inscribe themselves on land, altering the natural world around them: breaking prairie sod, seeding non-native crops, installing irrigation systems, and killing pests. It is also where that natural world can unexpectedly and effortlessly dominate: killing crops with a late spring frost, flooding farm lands, and parching fields with too little moisture. Both of these movements--humanity altering land and land affecting people--are understood implicitly as part of farming. Indeed, the tension between these two forces is part of the agricultural myth of farmers as heroes, who battle a faceless and daunting nature, even as they love it

and coax it into plenitude.

The farm is also a particularly interesting concept because it signifies in such different ways. There is a growing awareness on the part of environmentalists, for example, that farming constitutes a veritable biohazard. It is not uncommon to hear stories about the danger to water quality of large-scale hog operations, or the hazards of long-term pesticide build-up.¹ Soil degradation, artificially-created monocultures (in which seeding a single crop makes it more susceptible to disease), and the loss of natural habitat for wildlife are just a few of the questionable consequences of modern agriculture. Humanity's relationship with land has become so strained that, even for people tucked away in the middle of large cities, it is for some increasingly difficult to be unaware of agrarian stresses.

But at the same time, society also views farming, at least in a popular sense, as a vocation more than a business, and farmers as people who are fundamental to society, because, in popular parlance, they "feed the world." And even urban societies, I suspect, feel a vague regret at the demise of the grain elevators as symbols of the prairie. These persistent romantic assumptions about farms give rise to industries like rural bed-and-breakfasts that encourage urban people to commune with a wholesome and unsullied nature.² Underlying both of these readings--farm as biohazard and farm as site of noble

endeavor--is an understanding of the farm as necessary in a practical sense for our survival because it produces the food that we consume in order to live.

I have and will use the terms *agrarian* and *agriculture* to describe my subject, but it is important to establish some boundaries for the terms. I will use the word *agrarian* to describe anything pertaining to land use, but also to suggest a generalized sense of agriculture, which could include anything from fruit orchards to dude ranches. When I use the term *agriculture*, I will be concentrating specifically on what we might, until recently at least, have thought of as a typical prairie farm (in other words, a grain or mixed farm). For my purposes, I will largely exclude any consideration of the ranch. Ronald Rees, in *New and Naked Land*, argues persuasively that for several reasons ranching has typically been a different pursuit than farming. The ranch, unlike the farm, has not had, historically, the same connection to a particular piece of land. Rees shows that because early ranches were free-range, the rancher/cowboy developed a corresponding free-range personality with a perception of land quite different from a farmer's:

From his rancher's need to know his range and the behaviour of his cattle developed an attitude to environment that was more tolerant than the farmer's. To the farmer, virgin prairie was a wilderness that had to be "tamed" and cultivated, but to the rancher it was an

already productive milieu that needed only to be managed. The rancher felt that he and nature were partners, and he resented changes in the natural order. With time, ranchers themselves were forced to exercise control--they had to make fences and grow fodder once open range ranching was no longer possible or profitable--but their affections lay always in open, uncultivated prairie. (146)

Rees also argues that ranchers were historically more affluent, a condition which allowed them an ease that the sodbuster did not experience. Even the style of ranch settlement was different. The sprawling ranch-house was an abode that stands completely apart from the sod hut. And unlike the grid of the homestead system that isolated farmers on the prairie, a rancher, Rees tells us, was able to form an "organic settlement, not a mechanical one":

The most telling symbol of the greater spontaneity of the rancher's way of life was the cabin in the coulee surrounded by, not a shelterbelt, but a promiscuous growth of native aspen, willow, or box elder. Unrestrained by the sectional survey and the homestead laws, early ranchers, like the first farmers, were able to build their cabins or ranch-houses in places that gave shelter from prairie winds and storms. (144)

The ranch experience, too, has its own lively and popular literary

expression in the form of cowboy poetry, which in recent years has become a robust and enthusiastic celebration of the ranch.

Nowhere are agrarian concerns more evident than on the Canadian prairies where agriculture has evolved over recent decades, from a way of life that involved small, family-oriented, and community-based operations, inseparable from a particular culture or social network, to a large entrepreneurial enterprise called agribusiness. Through shifts in language, the neologisms *agriculture* and *agribusiness* themselves tell the story of agriculture's evolution. Agriculture was once a family-oriented way of life, a business to be sure, but also an endeavor that was firmly embedded in the fabric of a cultural community. Agribusiness, however, has shed the homey family associations connected with earlier stages of farming and become relentlessly commercial, industrial and technological, culminating in the factory farm.

To be sure, both agriculture and agribusiness are based on the concept of land possession. Ownership of land has always been a big issue on the prairies, in fiction and out of it. Settlers often accumulated land and continuously cropped it as a way of civilizing the prairie, the impetus behind Martha Ostenso's Caleb Gare and F.P. Grove's Abe Spalding. The simple equation for such figures was a belief that more land would equal more prosperity. Speculators, too, played a role in land (ab)use. As Maggie Siggins, a Saskatchewan

journalist, says in *Revenge of the Land: A Century of Greed, Tragedy and Murder on A Saskatchewan Farm* (1991), sometimes the owners of a particular piece of land were “not dedicated toilers of the soil; [but were those who] most hated getting their hands dirty. They were businessmen who hired other people to do the hard work. They were land-speculators who got rich by exploiting anybody who showed signs of weakness” (x) or, I might add, vulnerability. Siggins first became interested in a particular farm because of a grisly murder committed there in the 1980s, but her further investigation revealed a bigger story, a whole string of travesties that had been committed in the name of land ownership on this single farm, including the greed of speculators, the obsession of landowners determined to maximize their profit, and gamblers who “threw away their life’s work on worthless stock certificates” (x). Siggins says in her preface, “The terrible crime is only the climax of this drama. For over one hundred years, malevolence, unrequited ambition, and greed stalked the land. This book is about how the West was really won, and by whom” (x). As Siggins shows, the possession of land involves complex thought processes; it is at once financial and emotional.³

Land is worth large sums of money, but the idea of the home place also has enormous emotional significance for people who have spent lifetimes living and working on a piece of land. It would be useful here

to move to an American context for a brief, well-known example. John Steinbeck explored this tension between the concept of a working partnership of land with people, and land as factory, an industrial money-maker. In Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, subsistent tenant farmers are pushed off the land by increasing mechanization until they no longer have any personal connection to the land and the food it grows. The image of the alien man on a tractor, working for a large company, and moving unconnectedly over the field becomes a profound symbol of discordance between people and land:

And when the crop grew and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses. (49)

The increased industrialization which we find in Steinbeck is a force that, more widely, has driven a wedge between people and land, especially articulated in American literature. Steinbeck's gap between land and people prefigures the division between producers and consumers in more contemporary times in which people have little understanding of the origins or modes of production of the food they buy at supermarkets.

In response to such disconnections, journalist Lois L. Ross travelled

across the prairie provinces in 1984, talking to farmers about the state of agriculture, the result of which was a documentary-style book of interviews and photographs, *The Changing Face of Farming*. In her introduction, she distinguishes between the increasingly polarized enterprises of agriculture and agribusiness. Agribusiness, she writes, is a "corporate-controlled agriculture":

an industrial form of farming where success is based on specialization and expansion, with profit the main concern. The strategy is short-term and fast-paced.

Agriculture, on the other hand, has traditionally placed emphasis on a sense of rural community and the things that sustain a community or culture. The emphasis, rather than being primarily on the dollar sign, is placed on such factors as a strong population base, meaning many farmers, co-operation among neighbours and within the community, and protection of the environment and the soil through diversity. This means, of course, protection of a whole livelihood for the future generations who will make up the community and farm the land. (9)

Similarly, Trevor Herriot in *River in a Dry Land* persuasively argues that agribusiness, although it can, in the short-term, provide verdant homogeneous fields, reveals a darker side than the lush crops at first might show:

The dominant model of agriculture, supported by government programs and university research, has made farmers ever more dependent on petrochemicals and banks. From the synthetic fertilizers, pedigreed seed, and toxic cocktails of crop-spray to the outsized, fuel-guzzling, computer-enhanced implements and the trucks hauling the yield to the inland terminal, our farmers are pumping gas and money into the land at a frightful rate. How long we can sustain this kind of agriculture is a question we studiously avoid in our regard for the future and our definition of economy. (278)

Agriculture has become *agribusiness*, and something we mean by the word *culture* has given way to a successor whose name does not bear the old associations. What is especially germane to my interests is that agrarian change increasingly over the past century has provided a framework through which agriculture has become a signifying system in literature, creating works as disparate as Sharon Butala's nostalgic *The Perfection of the Morning* and Robert Kroetsch's postmodern "Seed Catalogue."

In "Seed Catalogue," Kroetsch asks, "How do you grow a poet?" The agrarian metaphor at the root of this question, for all the poem's theoretical savvy, is not incidental. Many Western Canadian writers and critics have echoed that same question (although perhaps not so

succinctly), speculating on the growth of artistic expression in a land that is not so far from a time when the primary concern was literal planting, as opposed to imaginative seeding. Even at the start of the twenty-first century, after several generations of settlement on the Canadian prairies, our relative lack of history has allowed a perception of rootlessness to persist. The pioneers struggled with their adaptation to this "new land" in immediate and physical ways. New immigrants came to an unfamiliar land and had to create not just a sense of home, but first shelter, garden, and crops--all the practical and necessary things that humans need to survive. Although contemporary Western Canadians, in recent years, have been less concerned with a physical making of place, they still struggle with the imaginative creation of place, a struggle that is made more problematic, in part, because people have a weaker link with the natural world than ever before. No longer pioneers mythologized as heroic people struggling to remake nature with indomitable will and endless toil, contemporary prairie dwellers nevertheless still seek to define themselves in ways that recognize nature and their relationship with nature. As Kroetsch says,

The human response to this landscape is so new and ill-defined and complex that our writers come back, uneasily but compulsively, to landscape writing. Like the homesteaders before us, we are compelled to adjust and

invent, to remember and forget. We feel a profound ambiguity about the past--about both its contained stories and its modes of perception. (*Lovely* 5)

This compulsion people feel to write themselves into a relationship with the land does not fade as society's ties with nature become more abstract. Kroetsch argues that they only change. He traces the movement between what happens to the farm in realist fiction, and what happens to the farm as a "remembered place" when it becomes a source of poetry. He muses that when farms and small towns

were the actuality of our lives we had realistic fiction, and we had almost no poetry at all. Now in this dream condition, as dream-time fuses into the kind of narrative we call myth, we change the nature of the novel. And we start, with a new and terrible energy, to write the poems of the imagined real place. (*Lovely* 8)

Kroetsch's argument is that the way place is imagined by a society affects how it is represented by writers, and in what genres it most crucially figures. He proposes, too, in outlandish Kroetschean fashion, that we might well, paradoxically, produce a place that is both "real" (manifest, given, immutable) and "imagined" (fashioned according to our dispositions). This double claim, that land is both given and made, I will argue, is crucial to literary expressions of the agricultural myth.

Place, as Deborah Keahey suggests, is always difficult to define. In

her study *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* (1998), she says place “can be a geographical location, but it can also be a symbolic, social, cultural or psychic one. To know ‘your place’ can mean to know who you are, or how you are defined by others, and your relationship to the world around you” (11). Similarly, the historian Gerald Friesen usefully details three main ways of thinking about a region. According to him, place can be defined in formal, functional, and imagined ways (“Defining” 14). The formal refers to a particular region’s landscape and climate, represents an idea, therefore, that the prairie is distinctive because of its physical properties. For instance, a sense of the prairie as a flat land form is a kind of formal definition, limited though it may be. The functional definition presupposes that a region has a certain function within a larger system. The prairie, for example, can be imagined as a grain-producing area, as part of a more subsuming economic structure. The imagined region, as Friesen says, is “much favored by students of prairie literature” (“Defining” 15) because it prefers to describe region as a myth or mental construct. For my purposes, I propose a combination of these approaches, by which the prairie is both an imaginative construction that resides in people’s minds, and an actual formal and functional system that people not only think about, but live in and work with.⁴ Like Kroetsch’s double claim that land is both given and made, this amalgam helps to establish

a complex ground for an agricultural myth.

Wendell Berry, an American poet and agricultural essayist (whose work, I believe, can be creatively transposed to a Canadian situation), also addresses the idea of land and society. Berry feels the need in a largely urban society to reconstruct the connection between culture and agriculture. Consider his metaphor for making place. Inside a bucket that has hung on a post for a decade in his native state of Kentucky, Berry watches as soil forms from the accumulated leaves, rain, and bird droppings that have collected randomly over time. He extrapolates this agricultural image to a cultural one:

A human community, too, must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself--in lore and story and song--that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related. (*What* 154)

Berry uses the example of the bucket making soil as a metaphor for the slow but certain accumulation of thought and deed that helps to form a sense of society that is inclusive of land (society and land together forms what Berry calls a "culture"). This accumulation creates for a particular place, a "memory of itself," a sense of place that is imaginative and, at the same time, tangible, made actual like the soil in the bucket.

Berry uses an organic metaphor to visually and concretely link

agriculture to culture. His juxtaposition of soil and culture may strike us as fanciful at first, but our own reliance on organic metaphors in the most quotidian speech (things are "cropping up," we get at the "root" of a problem, something is "nipped in the bud," there is a "blight" upon the land, we generate the "seed" of an idea, someone gives a "withering" look) suggests that Berry is speaking of something fundamental. Our pattern of language reveals how ingrained agrarian elements are in our imaginations, for rural and urban people alike. Besides our vocabulary, there are tangible signs of those imaginings everywhere. Urban interests, such as backyard gardens, landscaping, parks, zoos, the overuse of herbicides on lawns, to name a few, prove that agrarian modes exist everywhere, even in the heart of cities, because they exist, profoundly, almost irrevocably, in our imaginations.

There are two ways of looking at the question of land and people. One asserts that land creates people, that elements of the landscape form constructions of identity and self (the idea that prairie people, for example, are strong-minded and resilient because the harshness of the land has made them that way). This is the idea that informs Henry Kreisel's oft-quoted dictum: "All discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind" (257). Sharon Butala, in a similar way, argues that the land has created her partner, Peter, a rancher in southwestern Saskatchewan: "his psyche itself had been shaped by

Nature not merely by *his* observations of *it* but by its subtle, never described or even consciously realized, influence on *him*" (*Perfection* 88). This theory, sometimes called environmentalism, has operated as an implicit assumption in a lot of Canadian literature and criticism, giving rise to works such as D.G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* and Laurence Ricou's *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*.

The other approach to environment asserts that, in a certain way, people create land. This view does not argue that land is not a "reality," or that we cannot see it and touch it and map it, merely that whenever we think about, talk about, or describe land, we necessarily convert that empirical reality into a kind of fiction, and thus we "create" land (we may "see" a landscape as harsh or unyielding, for example, because of a need to explain how we have failed to adapt to it). Eli Mandel, in part, is talking about the idea of people creating land when, responding to Kroetsch's pronouncement, "The fiction makes us real" (*Creation* 63), he says: "The writer's task becomes an increasingly sensitive articulation of his literary tradition--not to write up the experiences of the country but to articulate the forms of its fiction" (58). As in a lot cases of radically-opposed views, the most satisfying position often lies somewhere in the middle--the occupation of place, and the understanding of it, leading to a reciprocity between people and land. Kreisel's title for his landmark environmentalist article, "Prairie: A State of Mind," shows how both views can and

often do co-exist.⁵

The reciprocity between people and land can be read in many agrarian texts. Farmers and farming in general are commonly described as being molded by the land and its imperatives. As well, the agrarian landscape takes on, say, the frustrations of the farm(er), and so land often becomes, then, barren and uncompromising. In Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, for instance, Caleb Gare is a tyrannical farmer who nevertheless has an ambiguous relationship with land. He is wholly focussed on his fields, the crops that he grows, and the ways he can dominate his family so that their efforts too can be funnelled into the land. But the land itself is described in the novel as being equally severe, as "tyrannical" as Caleb himself (35). His flax field, with its delicate blue flowers, however, would seem to represent something other than harshness. The flax is able to draw out a gentleness in Caleb, who would surreptitiously "creep between the wires and run his hand across the flowering, gentle tops of the growth. A stealthy caress--more intimate than any he had ever given to woman" (147).⁶ But even this lovely delicate flax is an ambiguous symbol: "There was a transcendent power in this blue field of flax that lifted a man above the petty artifices of birth, life, and death. It was more exacting, even, than an invisible God. It demanded not only the good in him, but the evil, and the indifference" (147). In the end, in

a futile effort to save the flax, Caleb drowns in the muskeg, even while he reaches "outward toward the flax, as if in supplication to its generous breadth" (298-99). Ultimately, the agrarian world fails Caleb as Caleb fails the agrarian world. The interplay between these forces--how land creates people, and how people construct place--shows how complex a signifier agriculture in literature can be.

Perhaps in answer to that complexity, contemporary writers sometimes respond by nostalgically looking back to a less complex agriculture, in a type of yearning for a pastoral ideal. Because the pastoral is connected to agriculture in this way, it will be useful to foreground the agricultural myth through a brief examination of pastoralism. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), a landmark study, Leo Marx traces the movement of technology encroaching on nature in an American context. Marx distinguishes between a "sentimental pastoralism," expressed by society in general, in a vague wish for a life outside cities or "the piety toward the out-of-doors" (5); and a more serious "complex pastoralism" that he sees demonstrated in American writing by authors such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Emerson. Marx traces how those writers invoke

the image of a green landscape--a terrain either wild or, if cultivated, rural--as a symbolic repository of meaning and value. But at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the

forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning. Complex pastoralism, to put it another way, acknowledges the reality of history. (362-63)

Marx's notion of a complex pastoralism that is rooted in contradiction provides a helpful concept in thinking about an agrarian world in an increasingly industrial landscape. Oddly, however, Marx is adamant in his distinction between what he pejoratively calls "sentimental pastoralism" and complex pastoralism, the focus of his work. While he does acknowledge that the two share the same impetus, his scathing rejection of the "sentimental" unnecessarily makes his argument for pastoralism less rich: "While in the culture at large it is the starting point for infantile wish-fulfillment dreams, a diffuse nostalgia, and a naive, anarchic primitivism, yet it also is the source of writing that is invaluable for its power to enrich and clarify our experience" (11). Marx is mistaken in this passage because he fatally divides the real from the imagined. He scoffs at the pastoral attitudes in general society (not acknowledging that they could be very complex themselves), but privileges that same movement in literature.

Marx's view is limited in ways that Raymond Williams, a British critic, in his discussion of cultural theory, speaks to. Williams' argument would suggest that Leo Marx unfortunately divides the different types of pastoralism that he sees in society and in literature. Williams warns us that art ought not to be looked on as an

object, but as a process that is intimately connected to the culture that produces it, and to the culture that actively engages it as readers or spectators: "we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws. They may have quite specific features as practices, but they cannot be separated from the general social process" ("Base" 387). Further, Williams' concept of residual cultures (past ideas and modes of experiencing that still exist on the fringes of the dominant culture) helps to explain how pastoralism, as a pattern of belief, or explanation, can still exist in an industrial age. Residual cultures reach "back to these meanings and values which were created in real societies in the past, and which still seem to have some significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration and achievement, which the dominant culture under-values or opposes, or even cannot recognize" ("Base" 386). The agrarian experience on the prairies, now past for most contemporary people, particularly as it involved the small family farm, represents one such residual culture that still has a role to play in the dominant prairie culture, and it is agrarian literature, in part, that supports that residual culture.

Another important, and Canadian, contribution to tracing a pastoral myth has been made by Northrop Frye. In *The Bush Garden*, Frye identifies two complementary aspects of the pastoral tradition: "At

one pole of experience there is a fusion of human life and the life in nature; at the opposite pole is the identity of the sinister and terrible elements in nature" (246). Both of these tendencies exist in varying measures in agrarian texts; in fact they represent the richness of those specifically agrarian tensions whereby the farm/farmer is simultaneously in tune with, and battling against, nature. Frye convincingly paints part of the backdrop to this contradiction:

Civilization in Canada, as elsewhere, has advanced geometrically across the country, throwing down the long parallel lines of the railways, dividing up the farm lands into chessboards of square-mile sections and concession-line roads. There is little adaptation to nature: in both architecture and arrangement, Canadian cities and villages express rather an arrogant abstraction, the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it. (*Bush* 224)

Frye also details a version of the pastoral myth that sees humanity allying itself with nature against society: "Nature, though still full of awfulness and mystery, is the visible representative of an order that the intellect murders to dissect" (*Bush* 245). In other words, in an increasingly complicated agricultural world, this pastoral develops in direct relation to the dislocations between people and land.

The more sentimental aspects of the pastoral are often connected with children through agrarian themes. Eli Mandel has argued that

prairie writing is often connected to the child-figure, citing such texts as *Who Has Seen the Wind*. He muses that the child's vision may be prevalent in regional writing because of its associations with innocence and home. Mandel says that the child-figure is related to "the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the *first* place, the *first* vision of things, the *first* clarity of things" (50). We can immediately see how evocative is the agrarian world in the realm of literature written for children. A significant proportion of this literature draws on agricultural backgrounds and themes, much more than one could expect by the numbers of people farming today. Stories of farm animals, farm life, growing food, and raising animals are the main subject matter in many picture books that are currently published for young children. As well, subjects like the seasons, and the cycles of birth and death, are often described against an agrarian background. In these narratives, farm life possesses a cachet, a literary value, a metaphorical value that is not necessarily linked to any particular reality. The counter response--the sneering contempt for simple hayseeds, their dull lives and stunted experience--is not as much of a feature in children's literature as it is outside of it. Where it does figure in a story, such as the tale about the country mouse and the city mouse, its purpose is to illustrate tolerance. In children's literature, then, the agrarian world is used as a powerful signifier of simplicity, goodness, community, industry, freedom, integrity and self-

reliance. Consider works like *Charlotte's Web* or the framing story of *The Wizard of Oz*. In a Canadian context, there are *Anne of Green Gables*, the William Kurelek series of "prairie boy" books, and Yvette Moore and Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet's *A Prairie Alphabet*.

Though these constitute our popular assumptions about agriculture in children's literature, our own general assumptions are often clouded by the "hick factor." There is in this counter reading an underlying perception that anyone involved in farming is a hick, a bumpkin, a simpleton who does a necessary job, but not a particularly complex one, and certainly not one that possesses any importance beyond its own sphere. It is, we imagine, rather embarrassing or in poor taste to pretend any differently. Indeed, Pamela Banting, who edited the 1998 collection *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape*, claims that this perceptual limitation on the part of society is mirrored by a parallel limitation in language. Banting argues that our relationship with natural landscapes is integral and that the language that we use to describe that relationship is entirely inadequate:

we lack a vocabulary, other than the slightly derogatory word "nostalgia," to account for the impact and the nuances of these inscriptions. As a result of this poverty of language, attachments to landscape and to place, especially in the postmodern world, are viewed as childish.

Indeed, we often feel comfortable, or at least more comfortable, with nostalgic renderings of nature when they occur in children's literature, perhaps because that is exactly where we feel they belong.

Before turning to extended examples of agrarianism in prairie writing, I want, briefly, generally, to delineate the term *agrarian* within a literary context. In *Agrarianism in American Literature*, M. Thomas Inge has traced several common threads of agrarianism through a wide range of American literature. By way of foregrounding the term *agrarian*, he gathers the basic ideas that underlie the concept in order to provide a guide to understanding the term over a range of examples. These ideas, which he divides into five categories, are helpful in the context of this thesis.

Firstly, the farmer, often idealized because of his closeness to nature, gives rise to characteristic virtues such as "honor, manliness, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality" (xiv), virtues that come directly from not only nature but also God. Secondly, farming is associated closely with independence and self-sufficiency because the farmer's "basic needs of food and shelter are provided through his cooperative relationship with nature" (xiv). Thirdly, farmers are often assumed to have a sense of identity that is linked to a concrete place, allowing them to live fully-integrated lives apart from the supposed alienation or fragmentation of city living. As a result, rural existence is often viewed as a "purer" way of living, in part, because of a

heightened sense of community it supposedly offers. Next, in Inge's taxonomy, cities and the industry and capitalism associated with them are repositioned in contrast to agrarianism, in an oppositional space where they "encourage corruption, vice, and weakness" (xiv). Lastly, for Inge, harmonious agricultural communities "provide a potential model for an ideal social order" (xiv).

Of course, not every agrarian text exhibits all or even most of these characteristics but these are the most commonly expressed ideas within this body of writing. As we move historically through literature into increasingly technological and industrial times, all of these terms which Inge has proposed as a way to address the agricultural ideal necessarily become more complicated, but--this is crucial to my argument--they never disappear completely. Agriculture, or more precisely, our views of agriculture, continue to shape our literature because we persist in believing in versions of these ideas about agrarian people and places, acceding to what I will call an agricultural myth. And as agriculture becomes more complex, whether it be from the inconsistencies of world markets or the advances in genetically modified organisms, or our increased dependence on chemicals, the agricultural myth too evolves into a more complex entity.

As an example of that complexity, consider Uncle Sean's battle with the bank in W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. In trying to irrigate

the land, Sean is reimagining the act of farming beyond what can be done by a few people. His vision will require outside financing and therefore another sector of society. Similarly, in the play *Paper Wheat*, by Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre, we learn that the individual farmer's self-sufficiency is a thing of the past, as farmers in grappling with international economics, must devise a cooperative grain company.

In this dissertation, I will offer a socially-oriented counterpoint to previous studies that have, on the whole, been psychological and thematic. For example, in "The Prairie: A State of Mind" (1971), Henry Kreisel describes an integral duality on the prairie: "man, the giant-conqueror, and man, the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat, form the two polarities of the state of mind produced by the sheer physical fact of the prairie" (256). Similarly, Laurence Ricou uses a geometric image in *Vertical Man / Horizontal World* (1973) to suggest a fundamental contradiction--that humanity derives power from the immensity of the land, but also wanders alone in the existential void that the image of the prairie can suggest. The contradictory image of the prairie as benevolent supplier, yet unpredictable destroyer, Ricou argues, stems from humanity's contradictory relationship with the land as it is formed through agriculture.

The connection between agriculture and literature certainly has

been noted elsewhere in Canadian criticism. Desmond Pacey suggests in *Literary History of Canada* that through agriculture one can trace prairie literature as it moves historically from romanticism to realism. Prior to the strain of prairie realism that developed with Grove and Ostenso, Pacey identifies what he calls "regional idylls," in the period between 1920 and 1940, romantic stories that often depicted a small agrarian world in which

the tone is predominantly optimistic. Trials and hardships are not completely ignored, but they are overcome or circumvented, and we are asked to believe that the world is essentially a good place in which such qualities as thrift, industry, and integrity will always, in the long run, triumph.

(178)

But such romances, like those of Mazo de la Roche (in the east), or, closer to home and to the concerns of this thesis, Nellie McClung (in the west), gave way on the prairies to a realism that was based on the demands of pioneer life. Pacey's argument is that the rigors of early agriculture soon rendered ludicrous any attempts to romanticize the breaking of land (186). Ricou, as well, illustrates agriculture's impact on literature through the sense of spiritual emptiness that the dust bowl of the 1930s engendered in the literature of the Depression, and even subsequent times. We can hardly be surprised that such should be the case, for writers do not work in a vacuum, cut off from their

social, cultural or political backgrounds, nor do readers read in isolation.

Robert Thacker's *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989), another study of prairie literature, is an ambitious work that looks at both the Canadian and the U.S. prairie/plains, and explores the relationship between the "great prairie fact" and literary esthetics and conventions. He does this by examining the depictions and writings of explorers, tourists, hunters, and finally pioneers. Thacker begins his investigation by setting up what he calls "the great prairie fact," a phrase he borrows from Willa Cather:

The prairie offered vistas ever at odds with the western European notion of "landscape." It was, and is, unlike any landscape conventionally thought pleasing. Rather than the variety and contrast of the picturesque, or the majesty of the sublime, the prairie presents instead, as Sir William Francis Butler described it during the second half of the nineteenth century, "a view so vast that endless space seems for once to find embodiment, and at a single glance the eye is satiated with immensity." (2)

Thacker goes on to explore examples of Canadian work by writers such as Grove, Mitchell, Ross, Kroetsch, and Margaret Laurence, tracing in all of them an insistence on land as the source of literary imagination. He links contemporary fiction writers to early explorers through the

similarities of their expressions in imagining prairie. Thacker notes how the pioneers differed from the explorers or travellers because they had to reimagine the prairie as a home place, not simply as a land through which they passed.

Deborah Keahey picks up this thread in her study on place in prairie literature, centering as she does on the concept of home. In *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* (1998), Keahey attempts to reimagine place as a “creation of the social, psychological, and cultural relationships that people have to particular landscapes or physical places” (7). In this way, she is interested in exploring both how writers imaginatively construct home and how those writings themselves “construct place and home. Literature takes on a performative homemaking function, and poets (and novelists, and dramatists) become literary homemakers” (4). Keahey examines the “imperial inscriptions” of home in texts such as Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* and Ian Ross’s *fareWel*, and the more personal and familial “relative geographies” of David Arnason’s *Marsh Burning* and Kristjana Gunnars’ *Zero Hour* in order to foreground her later exploration of how “place functions in relation to notions of home” (12). In this vein, Keahey, in different chapters, alternatively highlights home as a central core, a space that is always being displaced, or a concept that can be defined as movement itself. In contrast to Thacker, Keahey stresses that environmental pressures, whereby land dictates human psychology and

social relationships, is not nearly as helpful in the study of home as is “the effect of human culture on the land” (157). My own study will share both Thacker and Keahey’s positions. Any study of agriculture, it seems to me, has to take into account the great prairie fact, but it needs to acknowledge, too, that agriculture itself and our perceptions of it have inscribed land in significant ways.

There are many further texts which, though they do not speak specifically about prairie literature, do say illuminating things about prairie ecology or conservation or culture, observations that can be transposed to literary study. Creative non-fiction such as Sharon Butala’s *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994), Sid Marty’s *Leaning on the Wind* (1995), Don Gayton’s *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* (1990), and Trevor Herriot’s *River in a Dry Land* (2000) offer intriguing entries into literary worlds by combining close observation and imagination. Gayton’s comment, that artists “let themselves be frightened by mechanism, just as scientists shrink from myth, and from imagination” (15), helps to suggest how agriculture and literature, although seemingly strange bedfellows, can reveal a common world of land and text.

In all of these studies of prairie experience, the authors explore the role of the prairie itself in literary imaginings. While many of them have looked at the role of the pioneer and, like Ricou, identified a kind of rich contradiction whereby a person is subsumed by nature at the

same time as she dominates nature, none of them has specifically looked at agriculture as a process that factors into the tricky business of people, land, and literature. One study, however, allows us to see how an agricultural myth might develop.

By concentrating on writing as a cultural phenomenon, Dick Harrison, in *Unnamed Country* (1977), uses the concept of myth to describe tensions between land and people. Harrison outlines how people first coming to the prairies often struggled to understand and adapt to their surroundings. He argues persuasively that people need a way of seeing place not as simply land itself but in terms of its relationship to themselves. Harrison uses the example of the early prairie explorers and settlers who saw their "new world" with British eyes and so described it with British terms, sometimes making the unsettled Canadian prairie seem something like an English garden. The prairies were so alien and so "unwritten" that the only intellectual option for many settlers was to transcribe the old landscape that their minds had been trained to read onto the new landscape, regardless of how questionable the fit. Their store of imaginative images and vocabulary made them ill-equipped to be able to represent the prairies naturalistically.

Instead of adapting themselves to their new environment, the early settlers endeavored to force the prairie landscape into the old cultural norms. They had no experience of the prairies that would allow them

the necessary paradigm shift if they were going to see the land any differently. Harrison suggests that they sometimes failed to adapt because they were trying to understand the land as separate from any human reality:

they needed a way of seeing the land *in relation to man* before it could take on meaningful shape and acquire significant detail. Casting it as a wilderness or as a mere commodity were two inadequate and largely short-lived attempts to do this. What they needed, in effect, was a 'myth' in the popular sense of an imaginative pattern which would express their changed relationship to their environment. (28-30)

During the early part of this century, settlers used the garden myth as their imaginative pattern as, indeed, the Canadian government did in its propaganda designed to attract settlers to the prairies.⁷ The myth of the garden was very functional because it not only drew people to the west, but it allowed them to come to the prairies with an already established code of how to read the landscape. Ill-suited though the Western prairies were to the idea of bounteous nature, early settlers' imaginations strained to make the myth and the reality one. Harrison argues that the garden myth began around the turn-of-the-century and carried through the 1920's boom and its general

optimism. The garden myth certainly had its day in prairie writing, as it can be seen in the work of popular prairie fiction writers like Ralph Connor, Nellie McClung, and Arthur Stringer.

The experience of the Depression severely eroded the garden myth, but, Harrison argues, it still continues as a cornerstone of how we imaginatively see landscape:

the garden view of the West did express the basic positive response to the unnamed country as a glimpse of the first creation, and as such it remains a permanent feature of the prairie consciousness. If it obscures the less pleasant effects of isolation and hardship, it does highlight the peculiar inspirational qualities of the land and its promise which are as undeniably real. The garden motif never disappears from prairie fiction, though in many of the later novels it appears ironically, an image for the spirit of precarious optimism which is still typical of the prairie dweller. (34)

The garden myth's capacity to establish a satisfactory relationship between settler and landscape was limited because it did not adequately take into account the fullest extent of humanity's relationship with the land. As Harrison explains, the garden myth encouraged a dangerous cultural tendency. For the settlers, the assumption of a land contained within familiar

cultural patterns which were ultimately divinely sanctioned obscured the fact that their relationship to environment had changed or needed to change from what it had been in Britain or Ontario. The attractions of the myth could make them forget that it was only precariously in touch with the realities of the new environment, which had still to be reckoned with. (97)

I am arguing that the agricultural myth derives from this garden myth as a strategy by which we try to reckon with the prairies in the twentieth century and even early into the twenty-first, in the manner suggested by Raymond Williams' residual cultures, past ideas and modes of experiencing that still exist on the fringes of a dominant culture. The romantic ideal that infused so many early arrivals was not without its evidence in local life and therefore not totally fanciful. Harrison reminds us that Western Canadian fiction grew up in an area that already had a settled agrarian population (73). In other words, early Canadian plains fiction began with an agricultural template which showed how the garden myth could evolve into an agricultural myth. The agricultural myth draws fundamentally on the idea that nature is regenerative and bounteous, but extends that reading to include a role for people. In the garden myth, humanity is in danger of becoming inimical to the land: people can only ruin the garden, much as Adam and Eve despoiled Eden. So, while the garden myth sees humanity and

its artificial creations as corrupt, the agricultural myth invents the farmer, the virtuous and hard-working steward of the earth who acts as a mediator to nature. The agricultural myth, I am proposing, is a more inclusive pattern that allows for a more complex, and perhaps more credible, relationship between humanity and land. This relationship puts the tension back into the garden myth, allowing humanity a series of possible relationships with the land--Edenic among them--as they are constructed through the figure of the farmer.

The farmer has been an evocative figure in some earlier writings. In eighteenth-century America, Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, argued for the supremacy of the agrarian life, and by corollary, the supremacy of the noble farmer: "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God [. . .] whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue" (164-165). Jefferson was making a political and moral argument that America should remain agrarian, while leaving the manufacturing industry to Europe. This ideal of the noble, moral farmer persisted into the nineteenth century, certainly in American writing, as illustrated by authors like Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau, a self-styled and one-time bean farmer himself, believed that "the farmer redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural" (*Excursions* 192), while Emerson went even further to idealize and exalt the farmer's role with a declamatory

flourish: "The food which was not, he causes to be. The first farmer was the first man, and all historic nobility rests on possession and use of land" (134). The message here seems to be simple, but even here the farmer-figure is complex. The rhetoric of these passages would seem to suggest that the farmer is "natural," but words like "redeems," "nobility," and "possession" point to a person who is elevated within the powerful and privileging narratives of religion and politics, part of some divine intervention and inherited superiority. The farmer is positioned in a social and political hierarchy, even as he is named as "natural."

In Canadian literature, one of the most dramatic, and well-known, versions of the farmer appears in an early realist writer. Frederick Philip Grove in *In Search of Myself* describes being employed on a farm, hauling wheat from the farm to the railway. During one such trip, Grove noticed a farmer ploughing in the "dry belt" of the area, described as being unfit for farming: "The mere fact, therefore, that this man was ploughing as he came over the crest of the hill was sufficiently arresting and even startling. Besides, outlined as he was against a tilted and spoked sunset in the western sky, he looked like a giant" (259). The image was arresting, but the reality was not. When Grove stopped to talk to the new settler, he found not a giant, but simply an ordinary person. Consequently, Grove thereafter took a different trail when he hauled wheat, for it "seemed imperative that I

should never see, never hear that man again" (260). Grove is adamant because he does not want the real to interfere with the imagined farmer of the agricultural myth that would give rise to Abe Spalding in *Fruits of the Earth*.

Abe Spalding is the ultimate supercharged farmer--indefatigable, determined, driven to beat raw nature into a form of civilization, using agriculture as a club. Early in the novel, we learn, Abe wants "land, not landscape" (23), and subordinates everything else in his life, including his family and his community, in order to procure land: "He must have more land! He must get to a point where he farmed on a scale which would double his net income from a decreasing margin of profit. [. . .] To him, farming was an industry, not an occupation" (51). But even after Abe builds a successful farm with modern house, barn and granaries, his achievements seem meaningless. Only five years after he has built his palatial house, he finds in its structure signs of wear. The massive trees of his wind-break that surround the farmyard, too, are beginning to decay from disease. Abe lives to see his design to remake raw nature falter. His dream of "land, not landscape" now seems empty.

The distinction between land and landscape is crucial. Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* argues, in quite another direction, that land that is being worked by a farmer "is hardly ever a landscape -- which implies separation and observation" (120). "Land" describes

the thing that a person actively engages, when the fusion of land and person is in constant and dynamic flux. "Landscape," however, describes what is viewed from an aesthetic or contemplative distance. Abe, early in *Fruits of the Earth*, can only see land as raw nature that needs to be recast into a form of civilization. Only later in the novel does Abe come to see the land in an imaginative way. Walking over his land, seeing things anew, Abe notices the mirage-like effect of layers of air making distant things seemingly close, or near things apparently far away (135). Positioned at the threshold of controlling land and being controlled by it, Abe exemplifies the tensions that the farmer-figure embodies. He is at the economic and cultural crux of what Northrop Frye calls the "terror of the soul." Frye imaginatively describes how Canadians perceive and represent nature: "I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature [. . .] not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something these things manifest" (*Bush* 225). Such a farmer as Abe Spalding is the mediating, and sometimes terrified, figure between that imagined and real place.

Frye can also aid in the exploration of the agricultural myth through his comic and tragic visions of archetypal criticism. Frye outlines the comic and tragic outlooks for the human, animal, mineral, and unformed worlds in "The Archetypes of Literature." The agricultural

myth combines the comic vision of the vegetable world, which includes the garden with its sense of renewal grounded in the fecundity of the earth and its seasons; and the tragic vision of the human world, which includes the "individual or isolated man" (*Fables* 19), who, like the farmer figure, often struggles alone. The agricultural myth also links to Frye's seasonal myths that cycle from the creation of spring through to the floods and dead heroes of winter.

I would add, finally, some foci of my own devising as a means of addressing the love and hate that underwrite the agricultural figure who appears in prairie writing.

One of the most compelling ways of looking at the agricultural myth is through various active sites on the prairie farm--the house, barn, field, and garden. To suggest a versatile and multi-dimensional concept of location, I will use the ecological definition of niche in thinking about site. Don Gayton, a range ecologist who has written *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* (1990), is one of those unique writers who tries to marry science and the arts. Gayton describes with a biologist's zeal the opportunity of seeing niches developing in Saskatchewan in 1988 when Old Wives Lake dried up:

Niche is not unique to places like Old Wives; niches are everywhere, but simpler to see in new environments. The idea of niche is perhaps the fundamental concept of ecology; it is the multidimensional space that a plant (or

any other living organism) fills. Niche can be thought of as the abstract address at the intersection of a hundred biophysical streets. Temperature, sunlight, nutrients, and water are the big boulevards of niche. Backstreets of soil texture, snow cover, and salinity are then further crisscrossed by smaller alleys and pathways of selenium content, insect predation, wind levels during pollination, and so on. A plant's tolerances and capabilities in the biophysical environment will give it either a wide or narrow address in the infinite neighborhood of niche. (46-47)

Gayton describes niche as a complex three-dimensional web of variables, an "infinite neighborhood," rather than a single locus where several things come together at a common point. Gayton's understanding of niche suggests how a site can participate in a process of evolution that continually redefines itself. Niche also suggests how important the interaction between sites can be. The ecological concept can, I think, be fruitfully extrapolated to a literary world where writers in a sense attempt to construct niches on the prairies through their writing. For instance, Sinclair Ross creates niches in which his characters play out the hope and despair of a Depression farm. I am supposing that the concept of niche can be particularly fitting in its capacity to evocatively and variably describe place in literary terms.

My thesis investigates several strands of what I call an agricultural myth, and the relationships they embody, as they are represented in some mid- to late-twentieth century texts of the Canadian prairie. One of these strands is the figure of the farmer and the way it functions as a mediator between nature in itself (if ever there can be an “in itself”) and our conception of it. The second strand, developing from the relationship between farm and farmer, concerns a farmer’s domination over, yet subservience to, the land through agriculture and, more precisely, how literature represents that contradiction. The third point of contact considers the evolution of agriculture (*agriculture* embedded within a culture or a social network) to *agribusiness* (agriculture that has grown increasingly technological and entrepreneurial). And, as a structural aid, I consider how all of these ideas are manifested in terms of key agricultural sites--the house, barn, field, garden--and the various movements between and among them.

My reading of the farm covers an array of genres. It begins with a consideration of two contemporary farm stories by way of entering Sinclair Ross’s collection of short fiction, *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*. I trace the importance of the threshold between the various agricultural sites as a way of tempering what has been described as Ross’s unrelieved negativity. In chapter two, I move on to an

exploration of an extremely popular prairie (and Canadian) novel, W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. There I explore the duality of town and prairie, and the farmer figures that populate them. Chapter three touches on some contemporary poetry, and also an agrarian classic of the Depression--Anne Marriott's "The Wind Our Enemy"--and then settles into an exploration of a more complex and ironic evocation of the agricultural myth in Robert Kroetsch's classic "Seed Catalogue." Here, especially, the agricultural myth can be seen as alive and vigorous even amidst the pervasive ironies of Kroetsch's gnomic poem. In the final chapter, I turn to drama, touching on plays by Barbara Sapergia and Dale Lakevold, but focussing on *Paper Wheat* by Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre, to examine the theatrical possibilities of agrarianism. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the different ways that agriculture is made "real" on a stage and the effect this making has on the myth.

Notes

¹ Consider Trevor Herriot's argument, in *River in a Dry Land*, concerning intensive agriculture, such as hog operations that consist of 10,000 pigs that create the sewage equivalent of a large town's, which they pump into lagoons and spread over fields, putrefying the air and land and threatening the local watershed and groundwater. If the investors experience any 'community resistance,' they simply roll out their public relations plan assuring citizens that every precaution of science and agri-food engineering has been taken to ensure that public health standards are met.

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² Wallace Kaufman, an American real estate developer and conservationist, argues that developers are vilified by society, while farmers, who are developers, too, are upheld as noble toilers of the soil, a situation that he sees as highly ironic:

The notion that by preserving farmland we have fortified ourselves against development and struck a blow for nature is nonsense. From nature's point of view most farms are hugely destructive. What other form of development routinely poisons its soils and devastates

such vast areas, exclusively to serve people? A farm murders natural diversity and extracts the life force from nature's carcass to sell for profit. Most farming is voodoo ecology that makes a walking zombie out of nature. So why do we celebrate America's farmers with such a soft heart? Why do we find beauty in the farmscape but not in the well-landscaped shopping mall or subdivision? (313)

³ Siggins offers us another example of how land ownership can create unexpected pressures, as it involved the Thatcher murder case in Saskatchewan. Colin Thatcher, a well-known politician who had come from a well-to-do ranch background, was convicted of murdering his wife in 1984. Siggins, in her book *A Canadian Tragedy: JoAnn and Colin Thatcher: A Story of Love and Hate*, traces the brutal murder to Thatcher's conception of land, claiming that the Thatcher credo (a Thatcher doesn't sell land but only buys land) was the prime motivation behind the killing of JoAnn Thatcher. Siggins argues that land as a signifier of power, wealth, prosperity and family prestige was so all-consuming for Thatcher, that he would "do anything to keep the empire from crumbling" (508). For him, claims to possessing the land outweighed claims of a personal sort, a belief in capital being raised above any sense of human worth. Land possession can become motive for many human impulses, then, both positive and negative.

⁴ Stephanie L. Sarver in *Uneven Land : Nature and Agriculture in American Writing* (1999) carves out a related understanding in an American context. Sarver focuses “on agriculture as a ground whereon the forces of urban civilization meet the forces of unmediated nature,” but she adds, “I consider this middle space not only as an imaginative but as an actual space wherein occur actual events that have terrestrial consequences” (7).

⁵ As a way of exploring this rich contradiction, I offer an example drawn from Canadian literature outside of the prairie, but relevant because it speaks to the experience of a person entering an unknown land. In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Margaret Atwood’s character, Moodie, in “Further Arrivals” says:

We left behind one by one
the cities rotting with cholera,
one by one our civilized
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

It was our own
ignorance we entered. (12)

Atwood tries to reflect the enormity of the experience of new settlers

coming to an immense and unfamiliar land, but the description of the land is tellingly internalized within the settler. The people who are sailing into their own "ignorance" are not frightened by the simple fact of the land itself so much as by their conception of the land, land that has been inscribed with their own anxiety.

⁶ Notice the similar tensions in "A Field of Wheat" in which Ross describes the anxious sensuality of Martha as she caresses a bumper crop of wheat, her hand "stroking the blades of grain that pressed close against her skirts, luxuriant and tall" (73). A little later, as she contemplates her husband in the distant field, her "fingers touched the stalks of grain again and tightened on a supple blade until they made it squeak like a mouse" (73). Martha's gestures speak of a hopeful but distinctly hard-edged desire.

⁷ See, for example, W.H New's *Land Sliding*, in which he describes the various inducements used to encourage people to come to the west (85-86). A more thorough historical background is offered by Doug Owram in *Promise of Eden* and R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer's *The Prairie West*.

Chapter 1

Site-ing Prairie Realism in *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*

Sinclair Ross's short fiction has reflected the obvious agricultural tensions of the Depression. In this chapter, I will focus on the fault lines along which these strains can be most easily discerned, as they are realized at the various intersections of the farm's spatial domains. Similarly, contemporary agrarian short fiction has reflected its own pressures, primarily the disintegration of that family farm that Ross represented at its beginning. Writers like Sharon Butala and Rick Wenman write about an agriculture that has become so marginalized that it shows its stresses along fault lines similar to those delineated in Ross. Before I turn to the main focus of this chapter, *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, therefore, I want to examine two contemporary short stories that strongly suggest that agrarian tension is not just a thing of the past.

In "Gabriel" (1990), Sharon Butala describes the lives of one farm couple on the verge of losing the farm to foreclosure. Gabe and Frannie are caught in the midst of a drought that is turning everything green to brown and filling the ditches with fine blowing top soil. But they are also caught in a personal web of defeat--Frannie has recently miscarried their first child and Gabe, a third-generation farmer, must face the certainty of having to leave the farm and make a new life in

the city, a life that he cannot imagine. Gabe feels himself an anachronism, a farmer with “no crop to speak of” (106), and therefore nothing to farm. In a moment of comic irony, he even laments having no weeds, although, as he reminds himself, even if he did, he could not afford the fuel needed to plough them under. All of the losses come together in a whirl of events, illustrated by the big funnel cloud that batters their house. The losses even have a kind of logic to them, as Gabe admits that his own farming practices have contributed to the soil erosion, and the couple suspects that the widespread use of farm chemicals in the area may have been responsible for the miscarriage.

But there is also much about their circumstances that is not confined to the logical. For instance, this world turned upside down is reflected in the couple’s “haunting.” Gabe and Frannie hear noises in their house that they cannot explain: banging, jingling coins, the sound of footsteps. The wider world also reflects a place gone awry. Smoke from some unseen source is visible on the horizon. Gabe sees a UFO from his window one night, strange lights hovering over the hills where he walks. One day in town, thunder and lightning seem to come out of a cloudless sky and something strikes the pavement, leaving a hole in the concrete where Gabe and Frannie have just been standing. As in a Shakespearean tragedy, the natural world mirrors the bizarreness of a society that has lost its way.

In an effort to escape this strange world that Gabe reads correctly as the end of the life he has known, he retreats to his niche, the "last little bit of real prairie" on his farm, an area too steep to cultivate, what he has come to consider his "thinking place" (109), a site that symbolizes a privileged locale in the story. While there, he seeks out a connection to the land, significantly, through another culture's spirituality, retreating to the medicine wheel at the top of the highest hill to pray for rain. But, though he does feel rooted in the earth there, he remains far from reassured, as a strange force drags him inexorably down to his knees, a position from which he can feel the sky metaphorically falling: "He thought he could feel the sky on his back, felt it drop down his sides, surrounding him" (110). At that moment, he finds not rain, but only the spectre of his wife's frightened face, her anxiety mimicking his own.

The wind becomes the overriding symbol of Gabe's subjugation, blowing ceaselessly until he imagines it to be all-consuming, a malevolent force that will take away everything with a god-like wrath:

It would blow so hard it would blow them all--buildings, cars, animals, people--right off the face of the earth. It would blow them all to kingdom come and there'd be nothing left, not even trees or soil, nothing but bare, wind-scarred rocks and black chasms through which the wind would swoop and howl, screeching like the devil himself. (108)

Gabe, as his name implies, and as the story's title underlines, suggests the angel Gabriel. Like God's messenger, Gabe's visions may be prophetically signalling a coming apocalypse. The judgment that he feels is imminent may, however, be his own.

Despite this dark foreboding, the final vision of the story is more benign. At sunset Gabe walks out to his niche in the surrounding hills. From there, he gets an unobstructed view of his farm that is "so small in the big landscape" (118), his sense of vulnerability underscored by the effect of the setting sun: "It was a blazing, fiery red with a golden edge to it where it touched the hills and now it seemed the margin would ignite, the fire would burst out and consume the earth" (119). This apocalyptic threshold of potential violence, however, is not realized. The narrative turns in another direction when Gabe comes to a large rubbing stone that was used by his cattle, and by bison before them, a stone that he must have seen scores of times before. Now Gabe--suddenly, inexplicably--is struck by the warmth of this "miraculous" and "beautiful" rock (119), as if it were a living thing. Embracing the rock and resting his head against it, Gabe is given his "message." He envisions his hills evolving into hoodoos and his land lying fallow. He sees his and Frannie's future lives in the city, where they will "live both better and worse than they lived now" and how "for all the rest of his long workingman's life, his dreams would be of the farm" (119). The threshold here maintains a precarious balance of

hope and loss.

Agrarian tension similarly surfaces in a field depicted in a 1998 short story by Rick Wenman, "Charlie Butterfly." The main character, Charlie, is putting up a new fence between his cow pasture and his hay crop, sinking the anchor posts and tightening the barbed wire. The new fence is necessary because Charlie has just watched his estranged neighbor, Bob, that morning take down the fence in a frenzy of possessiveness. Here, dismantling, paradoxically, represents possessiveness, a sure sign that the world of the story has gone awry. Bob has gone from "retiring in Palm Springs to flat bust within six months" (68) through a combination of avarice and stupidity, illustrated by schemes such as an attempt to corner the organic market by selling "Green Beef," a venture that predictably fails. Charlie has bought the hayfield and cow pasture from Bob for a fair price, but Bob's growing strangeness towards his neighbor peaks when Bob begins dismantling the fence, meticulously removing each individual staple and levering out the rotten posts, all the time explaining to Charlie that "when I sold this land I never sold the fence. I just never needed it till now so I let you use it till I did" (67).

The story announces the importance of boundary with its opening paragraph. Charlie, lying in bed, thinks about the act of fencing and its parallels to opera singing. Charlie, an opera lover, imagines the whistling of the wind through tightened barbed wire as the voice of an

opera diva, rising and falling. Charlie imagines himself "pulling down on the fence stretcher, tighter and tighter, until the wind and the wire become a voice, and the voice begins to weep" (67). Fencing becomes for Charlie an artistic act in which he functions as a kind of conductor, just as, later, he describes an audience assembled for an opera in agrarian terms: "once the houselights go down, I become part of the uneven mass of heads, like a broken field, and across the landscape like fine wire tightening blows the voice of the Diva" (68). The next day, when Charlie is hastily forced to put up a new fence in the wake of Bob who is taking the old one down, Charlie even paints his new anchor post bright white so that it will glow as does the diva on stage, like a "white pillar" (68). Charlie, in an effort to escape the murky problems of farming, wistfully looks toward the clarity of art.

The rising voice of the diva presages the tension of the agrarian boundary. That threshold is, demonstrably, a dangerous place. Charlie describes his land as a "minefield" (67), as he bumps along the pasture in his truck, "paralleling the downed fence" (67), bottoming out in gopher and badger holes. Later, releasing a snag while tightening the fence wire, he is hurt as the wire snaps back and tears through his glove and into his hand. Similarly, Bob, after his crazed de-fencing, has "several wire cuts on his hands [that] ooze red blood over black crusty scabs" (70). Charlie warns Bob that he should get a tetanus shot to ward off "lockjaw," a condition that, ironically, seems already to fit

Bob's perception of himself as mute. Unlike the diva who gives her voice to Charlie, Bob, without his land or now even the fence that marked it, feels silenced, de-voiced. When Charlie asks him if he has everything he needs, Bob, simmering with aggression, "points to his clenched jaw" in mute response, while Charlie watches "a thin, purple vein pulsing above his left eye" (72).

At the end of the story, the danger of the threshold rises to a glass-breaking pitch as Bob lines Charlie up in the sights of his rifle. Charlie is mesmerized by the music of his new fence, but the diva's singing is only preparing for some final crescendo that, though imminent, is not yet realized by the end of the story. The whole scene is a perfect metaphor for how strained people's relationship with land has become and how the action at the threshold becomes a crucial indicator of that strain.

Few would accuse Sinclair Ross of writing heartwarming or sentimental short fiction. Most people reading *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* cannot get beyond the futility of Ross's characters as they struggle with the nemeses of weather and isolation. Certainly, Ross peoples his stories with farmers who are in a pitched battle with the land, through agriculture, and are losing more often than winning. Paul Comeau positions *Lamp* squarely as tragedy, supporting his assumption with many examples of the stories' "grim reality,"

including “the poverty, illness, isolation, and despair endured by the early settlers” (175). Dick Harrison argues that prairie realism has favored a more sombre view of prairie life because of “a mounting skepticism about the romance of pioneering” (*Unnamed* 100). Harrison describes prairie realism in terms of his larger thesis, as another part of humanity’s inability to imaginatively see themselves as part of the land. Robert Thacker writes quite differently, that the land moved from being a “setting” for explorer and artist to an “articulate landscape” for the pioneer, a landscape that defined, shaped and, ultimately, communicated a person’s emotions (145). Undoubtedly Ross’s characters *are* defined in part through the land, but Harrison’s more complex view of a reciprocity between character and land is closer to my views.

The nihilism of Ross’s fiction can be and often is greatly overstated, to a point of virtually excluding sentiments like those of Gail Bowen, who highlights the “backbone” of Ross’s characters:

There is something heroic in their efforts to give their lives value and importance, and it is because of their heroism that we come from Ross, not with a sense of defeat, but with a feeling of pride in what man is and with a modified hope for what he may become. (38)

David Carpenter too warns us that we should not so easily fall into the role of what he calls the “Rosselyte” or “the gladly suffering reader”

(67), who focuses solely on the undeniable desolation of stories like "The Lamp at Noon" and ignores Ross's humor. Carpenter, seeking to counter a puritanical yearning for misery, urges us to balance the darker work with a consideration of the comic elements in stories such as "The Outlaw" and "Cornet at Night" so that "we can appreciate Ross' subversive sense of the ridiculous, his buoyant affirmations. And best of all, we can rid ourselves of the excesses of the Rosselytes: their insistence upon suffering as a salutary element of aesthetic pleasure" (78).

Besides focusing on the heroism of characters and the comic aspects of the stories, another way of curbing excess nihilism is to consider those elements of the stories that depend in large part on imagination and dreaming. Angela Esterhammer points in that direction when she argues that Ross is not writing simply realist or mimetic fiction, despite this being the typical critical assumption. She argues instead that Ross's so-called "reality" is always linked with imagination, dream, or illusion. Stressing stories like "The Painted Door," "One's A Heifer," and "Circus in Town," she suggests that Ross is interested in how "we resist objective reality: by imposing our dreams on it, by perceiving only what is significant to us in it, by constructing our own narratives out of it" (22).

Despite Carpenter's focus on comedy and Esterhammer's on dream, the majority of critics have centred their explorations on

Ross's use of nature, on the effect of landscape and weather on characterization, the bleakness of the prairie mirroring the bleakness of the characters' lives as they eke out a meagre existence from the land. Many of these are Rosselytes, gladly suffering critics. While no one can deny that the land looms so large that, as Margaret Laurence says, it is almost the "chief protagonist" (7), there seems little value in simply delineating how bad things happen to good people, and pointing out the corresponding weather conditions in the background while they do. But there is a way of exploring this old terrain with a fresh eye. Lorraine McMullen borrows Marshall MacLuhan's oft-repeated phrase, the medium is the message, to suggest that the environment is "the medium through which the inner world of his [Ross's] individuals is revealed" (23). This observation, of course, says only what many other critics have said in different ways. But if one really agrees that the medium *is* the message, and not simply a way of exploring character, say, then perhaps an exploration of the medium, the agrarian environment, can be expanded to include a mix of the given and the imagined--not only how land impinges on characters but also how the dreams and schemes of farming create the literary world of Ross's collection.

My focus will be on the medium, the agricultural space, and the sites that make that medium so resonant. This focus has also the added benefit of avoiding the Rosselyte tendency, so that in reading

Ross's grimmer stories, one can still examine the agricultural site as a place of great emotional range. The agricultural space where Ross's characters play out their lives reveals the artistry that often fleshes out what otherwise would be a superficial bleakness. The ballet, that leads the characters to and from house, barn, and field, is intricate and meaningful, each one of these sites representing a range of states from exaltation to despair.

To begin, it may be useful to look at two examples of the farmyard itself relative to the prairie to see how complementary and contradictory the significance of sites can be. Often, in Ross, the farmyard is a safe haven, however tenuous, in the middle of a howling desert of prairie. In "The Lamp at Noon," for example, the dust storm makes the farm seem like a provisional shelter for Ellen in the midst of an otherwise hostile universe: "In dim, fitful outline the stable and oat granary still were visible; beyond, obscuring fields and landmarks, the lower of dust clouds made the farmyard seem an isolated acre, poised aloft above a sombre void" (13). The farmyard, positioned thus, suggests that an almost divine power looms inhospitably over the world. The construction of farmyard as provisional shelter or divine power is constantly questioned because of the pervasiveness and the force of the "sombre void," the prairie's emptiness. In "The Painted Door," when Ann looks out into the distance from her door, she feels distinctly unsafe and unprotected by the farm:

In the clear, bitter light the long white miles of prairie landscape seemed a region alien to life. Even the distant farmsteads she could see served only to intensify a sense of isolation. Scattered across the face of so vast and bleak a wilderness it was difficult to conceive them [farms] as a testimony of human hardihood and endurance. Rather they seemed futile, lost, to cower before the implacability [sic] of snow-swept earth and clear pale sun-chilled sky.

(100)

Light, normally the sign of vision or a caring deity made manifest, is here overly intense, a source of disheartening recognition of the farm's isolation. The farm is not a "testimony" of strength, but a cowering animal that cannot withstand the scrutiny of nature's implacable gaze. There lies the illusory hope of the farm, like a dim candle in a great space. So, in Ross's fictive world, the farm can be a kind of garrison offering a semblance of safety, protection, and familiarity, but it can also be impossibly small and ill-provisioned in an apparently vast and dangerous world.

One of the most compelling features of this spatial model of agricultural sites is the movement between the sites, the action at, or near, the threshold. The thing that charges Ellen's despair and makes the lamp at noon necessary in the title story is the encroachment of field into house, dust sifting in everywhere and settling onto the dishes

of the newly-set table, dust that Ellen imagines filtering into the baby's lungs and causing pneumonia, the inexorable dust that serves, symbolically, as the abrasive element in Ellen and Paul's marriage. The mark of this disruption is the field that will not stay put, insinuating itself into the house.

Ellen, herself, forever standing at the window, trying to peer through the swirling dust outside, forms a tableau that signals the importance of threshold. For Ellen, the prospect of blowing topsoil is particularly galling, as she believes that the farmers themselves are responsible for the degradation of their own livelihood, an understanding she illustrates in her lament to her husband:

Will you never see? It's the land itself -- the soil. You've plowed and harrowed it until there's not a root or fibre left to hold it down. That's why the soil drifts -- that's why in a year or two there'll be nothing left but the bare clay. If in the first place you farmers had taken care of your land -- if you hadn't been so greedy for wheat every year -- (17)

The result of mismanagement is a world gone awry, fields that improbably fly away, particle by particle, nature as not benevolent and forgiving, but inexorable and uncaring. Field obliterates house, the site of civilization that the pioneer (especially the pioneer woman) embodies. So committed is Ellen to the stays of civilization that she wants to escape to more stable sites, represented by her family's

business in the nearby town where the demarcation between uninhabited and occupied spaces is more certain. But Paul can only see such capitulation as disloyalty to his land and his dream of a bounteous future. For Paul *has* dreams and lives hopefully in the eventual realization of them. Civilization is not a town or a store for Paul, but his own farm in a future when all his fields will be orderly and all his crops will be fruitful.

And yet the field becomes the backdrop not for Paul's fondest dreams but for his unimagined nightmare. As in his earlier vision, he returns home to find that Ellen has indeed left the house with the baby in a vain attempt to escape the incessant wind, the strain of her madness propelling her over the threshold of what for her has become a smothering house. When Paul discovers the strangely empty house, a sense of foreboding overwhelms him: "On tiptoe at last he crossed to the adjoining room; then at the threshold, without even a glance inside to satisfy himself that she was really gone, he wheeled again and plunged outside" (22). This is the first of many threshold events in these stories in which characters find themselves suddenly walking tightropes that they had only barely perceived were there. The beleaguered house and the crisis at the threshold in "The Lamp at Noon" begin a pattern that will end with the most stunning threshold marker, the paint smear on John's hand in "The Painted Door."

The susceptible house is a favorite symbol for Ross as he

demonstrates the agricultural world's invasions elsewhere in the collection of stories. In them, the house, what should be the source of comfort and stability, is often subverted, inundated and made strange. As important parts of that narrative, doors and windows become prominent markers of boundary between inner worlds and pressing outer worlds. In Part II of "Not By Rain Alone," an unexpected September blizzard forces Will, one member of a young farm couple, out of the house to bring in the cattle, leaving a pregnant and nervous Eleanor at home. After unexpectedly spending the night cocooned within a haystack and being reborn out of the hay into the morning, he is shocked by what he sees when he returns home. He is momentarily distracted by his relief at seeing his missing mare, Bess, waiting at the stable door. But this lost and then found mare at the stable threshold is only a forerunner of the other female who will be found and then lost. At first Will moves towards Bess,

but glanced towards the house and stopped abruptly. The kitchen door was open; there was a drift across it, two feet above the threshold. He stood weak and dizzy a moment, then recovered swiftly and explained; Eleanor hadn't shut the door properly; it needed a strong push to make the lock catch. Bess whinnied. He half-turned towards her -- hesitated -- bolted across the yard to the house. (65-66)

Will's hesitation here between horse and wife underscores his intimate connection to the horse, a situation that we will see repeatedly in the collection. Ross draws attention to the farmer's relationship with his horse in this instance through the description of Will's movement. Even though Will chooses to check on Eleanor first, he "bolts" to the house as a horse would do. Will's weakness and dizziness at seeing the snowed-over threshold of the house underlines the dramatic blurring of agricultural spaces, caused here by the snow encroaching on the house. As Will's physical reaction suggests, the sight of something so absurdly false--a door opened, seemingly graciously, to the bitterness of a winter storm--is viscerally disorienting.

The whole scene smells of a crisis that even Will's hasty rationalizations cannot dispel. What he finds at the house is surreal:

snow was mounded right across the kitchen, curled up like a wave against the far wall, piled on the table and chairs. Even on the stove -- the fire must have been out for hours. He shivered as he stepped inside. There was a dingy chill that he had not felt in the open air. The familiarity of the kitchen was distorted, unfamiliar; it gaped at him in the grey light as if resentful of his intrusion. (66)

Will is suddenly un-homed as the alien snow drifts into the familiar domestic space, even on to the stove, the source of heat and comfort, the hearth at the centre of the farm home. When survival in a prairie

winter demands clear boundaries between house and not-house, snow lapping at the living space suddenly makes the familiar tragically unfamiliar, even malignant and threatening. The space, personified as gaping and resentful, turns the tables on Will who thinks he is coming "home." The house is so transformed from hospitable to inhospitable that Will correctly interprets this transformation as Eleanor's peril.

While Will, in waiting out the storm, had been figuratively returning to the womb in the haystack, his own child has been striving to leave the womb in childbirth, the ultimate threshold event (Fraser 77). Interestingly, as the house is being un-homed, the field with its haystack is being transformed into a shelter, a place of comfort. Significantly, even after Will finds his dying wife on the bed, his first instinct is to get the snow out of the house, as he strives in a misguided effort to eradicate the upside-down image and to recreate the normalcy of the home he had left the previous evening. Only later does he decide that he must ride for help. But the invasive snow is such a powerful force in Will's mind that, even after he rides hell-bent to the neighbors' house, the first thing he blurts out shows an odd fusion of circumstances: "Eleanor -- she's having her baby -- the house is full of snow" (66). Will sandwiches both images together as, indeed, in his mind, the birth of his child and the snow in his house (cause and emblem of his wife's death) are both markers of threshold that are potentially thrilling and dangerous.

Will uses the breakdown between outside and inside as a convenient and dramatic shorthand for another crisis. After Eleanor's death, Will stands, literally, at the threshold of his house looking out at the now-melting snow where, in terrible irony, the landscape masquerades as spring, and, figuratively, he stands at the verge of his future as a single parent: "There was a hushed, breathless silence, as if sky and snow and sunlight were selfconsciously poised, afraid to wrinkle or dishevel their serenity" (67). Again, Ross uses personification to bring nature to tactile life, the disturbance figuring as an irregularity on a smooth surface. The knife-edge of Will's temporary serenity, the calm after the storm, is broken by his son's cry and he is forced to turn his attention to the now defamiliarized house that contains his dead wife and his infant child, emblems of a broken and (partly) restored domesticity.

The broken house is a version of the failing garrison. The term might be especially fitting, as it derives from Northrop Frye's conception of Canadian writing. Certainly the term applies to many of the houses in Ross's stories. In Frye's famous formulation, he presents the garrison as "a closely knit and beleaguered society" (*Bush* 226) and the garrison mentality as the psychological and social state, a fearful and guarded condition, that develops when that garrison finds itself "confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (*Bush* 225). Though Ross's farm

house is not precisely a society, it nevertheless functions as a smaller version of that larger community.

Animated nature and the invaded house illustrate the garrison once more in "A Field of Wheat." John and Martha, a middle-aged farm couple, breathlessly marvel over their bumper crop and rekindle some feeble hopes for the future, hopes all but obliterated by the previous years. However, despite the title, the destruction of the field of wheat does not itself form the dramatic climax of the story. That moment clearly comes earlier, as the hail breaks into the house, shattering the family's domestic world. As the storm approaches, and Martha instructs the children, Joe and Annabelle, to hold pillows tightly against the windows, they are all energized by the impending drama. When the first hailstone hits, "a sharp, crunching blow on the roof, its sound abruptly dead, sickening, like a weapon that has sunk deep into flesh" (78), the adventure quickly becomes an all-out war. As hail ricochets off the house like gun fire, Ross's descriptions become more elaborate and detailed, making the violence of the storm greater by the effect of slow motion. The inhabitants are "deafened, pinioned, crushed," the windows break, throwing children and pillows aside

before the howling inrush of the storm. The stones clattered on the floor and bounded up to the ceiling, lit on the stove and threw out sizzling steam. The wind whisked pots and kettles off their hooks, tugged at and whirled the

sodden curtains, crashed down a shelf of lamps and
crockery. (79)

The extended personification of the wind as it “whisked,” “tugged,” and “whirled” suggests not only the malevolence of the storm, but also an almost prankish attitude, as if the weather represents a darkly comic force.

In the aftermath, there “was hail heaped on the bed, the pictures were blown off the walls and broken, the floor was swimming; the water would soak through and spoil all the ceiling” (79). Ross makes the familiar domestic world chilling with his very concrete images, ice “heaped” on a bed and picture frames mangled. The floors and ceilings, those domestic boundaries that are taken for granted, now demand attention. The feminine space of the house, often the site of culture and refinement, evident in Ross’s deft mention of the pictures, is now in ruins, Martha’s hopes and dreams for herself and her family broken and dispersed. The destruction of the house leaves the family “silent,” “awed to calmness,” “averting their eyes from one another” (79). Just as in “Not By Rain Alone,” here in “A Field of Wheat,” the civilized, ordered, and familiar world of the house is ruptured suddenly and dramatically by the storm. The flimsily-fortified house is breached and, as if to highlight the dangerous nature of the threshold, its ambiguous terrain, at whose edge life is lost or sheltered, the family finds the dog, Nipper, “beaten lifeless” into a “mangled heap” (79) at

the door.

After the appalling defamiliarization of home and threshold, the discovery of the crop that they know will have been razed serves merely as the anticipated denouement of the story. As they venture outside, John and Martha see the eerily quiet aftermath of the dramatic violence that visited the house:

There was no sound but their shoes slipping and rattling on the pebbles of ice. Both of them wanted to speak, to break the atmosphere of calamity that hung over them, but the words they could find were too small for the sparkling serenity of wasted field. Even as waste it was indomitable. It tethered them to itself, so that they could not feel or comprehend. It had come and gone, that was all; before its tremendousness and havoc they were prostrate. (80)

The effect of the wasted field is more cerebral than the visceral gutting of the house; it is a "serenity" that leaves them motionless, prostrate like itself.

Ross has carefully set up the field of wheat in the beginning of the story as a suggestive and paradoxical symbol of something unconquerable. The narrator describes Martha's many hardships, including her loss of a young child, "and yet the quickest aches of life, travail, heartbrokenness, they had never wrung as the wheat wrung"

(74). For Martha, Ross is careful to show us, "wheat" is not simply a signifier for crop, but a convenient metonymy that stands for spouse, children, future, mood, self-worth, and any number of other things. Nor is the physical wheat that stands in the field a simple matter in what it means to these farmers, for it is a cross between a fragile child that needs protection and an autocratic tyrant that requires subjugation:

For the wheat allowed no respite. Wasting and unending it was struggle, struggle against wind and insects, drought and weeds. Not an heroic struggle to give a man courage and resolve, but a frantic, unavailing one. They were only poor, taunted, driven things; it was the wheat that was invincible. (74)¹

The wheat, of course, is anything but invincible, however wearing its fortunes may be upon the couple's wishes; individual crops die quickly or "tantalizingly" slowly by "[g]rasshoppers perhaps, sawflies or rust," but the necessity of wheat and the hope that it symbolizes, the imperative of the crop, the "going-on" in "bitterness and cowardice" (74), remains for the couple constant and all-consuming. As Robert Chambers says so succinctly of these characters, "[t]hey think crop" (15). Everything else that can sharpen the focus of life has faded away, even Martha's feelings for John:

She had loved John, for these sixteen years had stood close watching while he died [. . .]. He had grown unkempt, ugly, morose. His voice was gruff, contentious, never broke into the deep, strong laughter that used to make her feel she was living at the heart of things. John was gone, love was gone; there was only wheat. (74)

Ross's insistent series of adjectives, conspicuously suspended by commas, intensifies the sense of Martha feeling overwhelmed by those qualities that have subsumed John.

So, in the end, after the hail, when there is no wheat, there is still wheat, because inevitably another crop will be planted. Like the head of a royal house, the wheat can never really die, because like kingship, the name, and the attendant power that has been conferred upon it, is substituted into the newest version. The child/tyrant wheat will always exist because farmers' expectations will always exist, illustrated in "A Field of Wheat" by the occasional "straw standing bolt upright in headless defiance" (80) after the hail storm, and foreshadowed by the poppy that Annabelle picks from her garden, and mourns even while it is whole because she knows that one stiff wind will leave it a bony stalk. The wheat therefore can function as a dual symbol of both bull-headed determination and incurable aspiration.

John and Martha, looking on the destruction of their wheat, even as they are stunned into silence now by "the sparkling serenity of wasted

field,” are silenced too by the presence of each other, neither wanting to give form, being able to give form, to the calamity with words.

Martha, inured to the paradox of everlasting and ever failing wheat, struggles to find a resolve within herself to soldier on, but loses it abruptly as she reenters the house. For Martha, the ravaged field does not have the power of the violated domestic space whose ruin she has witnessed and fought against:

But in the house she was alone; there was no sunlight, only a cold wind through the broken window; and she crumpled again.

She tried to face the kitchen, to get the floor dried and the broken lamps swept up. But it was not the kitchen; it was tomorrow, next week, next year. The going on, the waste of life, the hopelessness. (80-81)

Without the presence of John or the children, Martha can neither contain, nor share, the devastation of her space. The chopiness of the phrases with which Ross describes her thoughts, their pauses and repetitions, here mimic the frustration typical of Ross's characters as they find themselves caught in an endless sweep of time marked by repeated disappointments. The desolated kitchen is a marker of Martha's bleak present, but also a portent for the future. The fabric of Martha's day-to-day world has been torn and the invaded house has become the potent emblem of that rent. The lesson of the wheat is so

powerful, however, that Martha, in the end, doggedly begins to repair the torn domestic space for the sake of her husband and children, slave again to the master wheat.

The house is the familial centre of the farmyard, its ubiquity in early prairie fiction not at all surprising, considering the importance of the house to early settlers:

the provision of shelter on the prairies was equivalent to proclaiming one's social status: the settler could initially build a sod hut at no expense, progress to a lumber shack with lean-to additions at a cost of perhaps forty dollars, and finally, should he prove to be a financial success, announce his wealth with the building of a "New House."

(Jackel 48)

The lack of a "proper" house propels Part I of "Not By Rain Alone."

Will, a young farmer, looks at his wheat that, by day sixteen of a dry spell, is on the verge of failure. In Will's mind, the wheat is inextricably linked to his future domestic prospects. Will wants to marry Eleanor, a daughter of a neighboring well-to-do farmer, but he cannot imagine bringing her to live in his two-room shack, the same shack that he himself cannot bear thinking of returning to after a day in the field: "he shrank from the house, from the heat and flies and the dirty dishes piled up waiting for a week to be washed" (54). The week's worth of dirty dishes is the depressing symbol of Will's precarious

domestic possibilities, and the endless housework that was his mother's lot. The story moves back and forth in time, as Will remembers his mother, "a shrunken, old little woman" who "had died four years ago at forty-nine" (56), imploring his father for improvements to this same house, improvements such as the new wallpaper that Will, trying to clear his mind, still moodily contemplates:

But there was no escape. It was the paper now, cracked and sagging, long brown streaks across it where the rain kept beating through the roof. He remembered the spring they put it on. . . how she had had to beg and storm for it -
- the welt of bitterness it left across their lives. (56)

Little wonder that even the framed photo of Eleanor on the dresser does not seem to fit, much less tame, its surroundings. Will, stricken in his understanding, cannot conceive of Eleanor being so framed in such a way, re-living his mother's atrophied life.

Another version of the shrunken life is enacted in the famous climax of "The Painted Door." In terms that are relevant for that story, Robert Kroetsch has delineated a "basic grammatical pair" that he sees working in prairie fiction: "house: horse. To be *on* a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* a house is to be fixed: a centring unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. [. . .] A woman ain't supposed to move" (*Lovely* 76). This pattern of movement and stasis is common in Ross's stories, as seen earlier in

"September Snow" when Will rides off and Eleanor stays at home. The horse/house dichotomy in "The Painted Door" is slightly altered as John walks away from the farmhouse (a sign of his plodding anti-cowboy image) to help his father, while Ann waits out the snow storm, idling away the time painting, waiting for their neighbor, Steven, and then waiting some more for the safe return of her husband. Ann's predominant action in the story is inaction; she is forced into the stasis of Kroetsch's dichotomy. As in "The Lamp at Noon," in which Ellen goes to the window to try to see through the dust, Ann here tries to maintain a feeble connection between inner and outer worlds by clearing the frost from the window with her breath. As Chambers says, such moments are typical in Ross, a "wife alone in the farm house, straining for a glimpse through the window [. . .]. These are the loneliest women in Canadian fiction" (15). Like Ellen, Ann is completely absorbed by margins, caught between the need to keep inner and outer separate, and the equally strong desire to move easily through the intervening membrane, proving to herself that life still offers her this choice. In her distress, however, she tries to block the window sills and door jambs, and hangs a blanket over the door to keep out the draughts in order to preserve the distinction between her house and the hostile world outside.

At the same time, she also wants a bigger slice of that other world, as she painfully waits to bust out of the horse/house dichotomy.

When John does not return at the expected time, Ann finds a sense of possibility in herself, and feels empowered to venture out, across the frame that has defined her domestic space, into that other, outer male space to feed the animals in the barn:

It was the first time she had been left like this on her own resources, and her reaction, now that she could face and appraise her situation calmly, was gradually to feel it a kind of adventure and responsibility. It stimulated her. Before nightfall she must go to the stable and feed everything. Wrap up in some of John's clothes -- take a ball of string in her hand, one end tied to the door, so that no matter how blinding the storm she could at least find her way back to the house. She had heard of people having to do that. It appealed to her now because suddenly it made life dramatic. (107-108)

Ann here momentarily captures some of the enthusiasm of Ross's child characters. Like Joe and Annabelle before the hail storm hits, Ann is energized by the role she will play, putting on John's clothes, moving around the room in them, imagining herself "pitching hay and struggling over snowdrifts" (108), playing out the line of string, an umbilicus in which she innocently trusts, not recognizing it as an improbable and flimsy lifeline attached precariously to the door. She is childlike but also determined; this is not a woman imperilled, but one

rushing to meet a challenge. In fact, Ann constructs herself for the moment as a male, the kind of romantic figure who can take on the wrath of the elements, test herself against and among them, because of her strength and fortitude. All of a sudden, life has zest and thresholds are meant to be crossed.

Her brief foray into the male world is unceremoniously brought to an end by the storm's wrath that forces Ann back to the relative safety of the house and its feminine space. In fact, so forcefully is she turned back that the refuge of her own house no longer seems as secure as once it had appeared:

For so fierce now, so insane and dominant did the blizzard seem, that she could not credit the safety of the house. The warmth and lull around her was not real yet, not to be relied upon. She was still at the mercy of the storm. Only her body pressing hard like this against the door was staving it off. She didn't dare move. She didn't dare ease the ache and strain. (109)

Again, like a child, Ann uses the charm of immobility as protection against a crazed world. Her moment of challenge has cost her both worlds and so Ann here imagines that she herself has become the precarious threshold, her small physical self the only thing that divides the two worlds of inner and outer. Without a more contained niche, Ann is obviously in danger.

Into this breach, without apparent effort, walks Steven, who is immediately transformed from a fairly innocuous neighbor into a figure that is part-menace and part-romance. After all, he has come directly from that mysterious and stormy outer world where men ride horses even in the teeth of inclement weather, risking themselves in a world of powerful and dangerous animalism, for Ann has watched the snow as it spun and whirled through the yard like the mane of a rebellious horse (106), and like the movements of a snake (105). Steven brings with him both of these associations, as he slithers into the house, speaking to Ann "with an undertone of insolence, a kind of mockery even" (110).

Sensitized by his manner, Ann begins to think of her cultured neighbor as a thoroughbred and to compare him with her work-horse husband. But Ann's decision to have sex with Steven has little to do with Steven, the man, and a lot to do with Steven, the figure that represents the outside world of romance and risk that Ann wants so badly to engage. The narrator explicitly makes the connection between Steven and the outside world: "[i]t was less Steven himself that she felt than his inevitability. Just as she had felt the snow, the silence and the storm" (111). Through Steven, Ann can connect with a world that impinges upon her, in her small shelter, but one which also tantalizingly beckons to her.

After she sleeps with Steven, the house as refuge becomes even

more of an endangered animal. Later she “dreams” of John returning, and she arises in the night, only to find her house, once (to a degree) comforting, now cold and unfamiliar.

Earlier in the evening, with the lamp lit and the fire crackling, the house had seemed a stand against the wilderness, a refuge of feeble walls wherein persisted the elements of human meaning and survival. Now, in the cold, creaking darkness, it was strangely extinct, looted by the storm and abandoned again. (116)

Notice that here the house is a thing to be “looted,” but also an animal that faces extinction. There are parallels in Ann’s relationship with Steven, as he “loots” the house that Ann is, introducing a further element of alienation into her life on the prairie, not unlike extinction. Ann’s already strained relationship with the house has become more problematic with Steven asleep in the conjugal bed, and as if to highlight this, Ann’s confusion in the night sends her to the outer limits of the house: “seized by a sudden need to suffer and atone, she crossed to where the draught was bitter, and for a long time stood unflinching on the icy floor” (116). Ann here is the gladly suffering character. Unable to do anything daring and heroic, such as throw herself on her sword, she resorts to exposing herself to yet another draught. In the morning, after she decides that John is, after all, the man she wants, “she stole back to the kitchen, and without thought,

impelled by overwhelming need again, returned to the door where the draught was bitter still" (118). Just as Will, in "Not By Rain Alone," stands on his threshold, both literally and figuratively, so Ann repeatedly pulls herself to this borderline of uncertainty.

The climax comes in Ann's discovery of the white paint on John's frozen hand, the sure sign that John had indeed fulfilled his masculine promise to return against all odds. As Dennis Cooley observes, it is the sign "that he crossed the threshold, entered into a room of knowledge so devastating that he wandered dazedly? deliberately? into his death" (159). What makes the revelation so dramatic is, of course, its position in the narrative, coming as it does in the final sentence and indeed the final word of the story. But its power is further enhanced through the conflation of the images of inner and outer on John's hand. Before the final line, John's presumed death is tragic but comprehensible--the misfortune of freezing to death, bad luck in succumbing to the turbulence of a prairie blizzard. But the smear of white paint on the white frozen flesh, the subtle sign that only Ann can read, tells another story. The white paint that Ann had used to create the "purity" of unblemished, unbesmirched walls now forcefully signals its opposite, in the form of John's knowledge of Ann's infidelity. Further, paint that is meant to cover now reveals, but indistinctly, the fleshy reality of John like a palimpsest under the mark of paint, solid and hard, unlike the shadowy John of Ann's dream. The

new "painted John," like a kind of macabre art object, is an ironic footnote to the John that Ann wanted, one who shaved even when it was not necessary, instead of the John (like the "unkempt" John of "A Field of Wheat") who through the sacrificial gesture of his endless toil, became "a little duller, older, uglier than he might otherwise have been" (103).

Not only is the white on white image "an appallingly unanswerable reproach" to Ann (Laurence 11), and perhaps an indicator of her future life without color, but also the shock of inner and outer worlds colliding for the reader, the color of illumination and recognition. It is also another powerful marker of the threshold, that knife-edge of consciousness where the action can take completely unexpected directions. The painted door marks the passage from one side to the other: loyalty to betrayal, self-awareness to self-delusion, and, ultimately, life to death.

Although the safety of the house makes it at times a garrison in the storm, the house can also function as a symbol of constraint. This is the flip side of the overly feminized domestic space--what happens when its "civilization" becomes artificial and pretentious. In "Cornet at Night," the romantic young boy, Tom, associates the house with squeaky corduroys and practising the piano in the "dark, hot, plushy little parlour" (36). When he brings home Philip, as an unlikely hired hand, Tom imagines his house expanding to encompass musical

evenings filled with duets, Philip on cornet and himself on piano. But Tom soon recognizes, what all along he has half-realized, that his parlour can never be the mecca of musical expression that he might have once imagined:

I had been half-intending to suggest that Philip bring his cornet into the house to play it for us, I perhaps playing with him on the piano, but the parlour with its genteel plushiness was a room from which all were excluded but the equally genteel -- visitors like Miss Wiggins and the minister -- and gradually as the meal progressed I came to understand that Philip and his cornet, so far as my mother was concerned, had failed to qualify. (48)

His mother, as cultural custodian, has effectively circumscribed Tom's musical world until it resounds with a metronome-like regularity, in a weekly cycle of chafing clothes and pinching shoes, stern postures on hard-backed chairs, and a narrow musical prescription of wooden hymns designed to impress Aunt Louise. Ross also insists on a hot cloying tactility through the repeated use of "plushy" and "plushiness." The parlour becomes the suffocating hot-house space of culture, apparently earnest, but lacking in flair or creativity.

But Tom's musical horizons expand when he meets Philip and glimpses the world where pale, slender-fingered men play in bands and orchestras. On this, his first trip to town, Tom has begun the journey

feeling fearless, resourceful and confident, on his way in a male quest. But his journey is imperilled when the worldliness of the town and, in particular, the disdain of the shopkeeper and the man with the yellow shoes leaves him anxious and uncertain. His subsequent choice of a musician, one who even Tom can see is *not* a farmhand, is his way of aligning himself with something larger than the condescending town. With Philip beside him in the wagon, he can

settle scores with Main Street. I wanted to capture some of old Rock's disdain and unconcern; I wanted to know what it felt like to take young men with yellow shoes in my stride, to be preoccupied, to forget them the moment that we separated. And I did. [. . .]

That was what mattered now, the two of us there, and not the town at all. (44)

Notice the sense of movement here in Tom's sentiment, taking people in stride, being able to forget them after separating from them, as he proudly rides in the wagon with Philip in solidarity. Notice also the language of love inherent in the description of their juxtaposed bodies, "the two of us," setting them apart from the rest of the world. The allure of this larger world, larger even than the town, resides in Tom's homoerotic attraction for the man with the "slender" hands that have a "shapely quietness" (42), and in the instrument that those hands manipulate, the cornet, "shapely and eloquent, gleaming in the August

sun like pure and mellow gold" (46).

Tom asks Philip if he might play his cornet at night, so profound does he believe the music must be, that nothing short of the night sky could contain it. Even after hearing only a fragment of music, the ill-timed note that causes Rock, the old horse, to shed his years and bolt across the prairie in a wonderfully comic scene, Tom is enthralled with the promise of that note and the amazing instrument that made it:

Even though it was safely away in its case again I could still feel the cornet's presence as if it were a living thing.

Somehow its gold and shapeliness persisted, transfiguring the day, quickening the dusty harvest fields to a gleam and lustre like its own. And I felt assured, involved. Suddenly there was a force in life, a current, an inevitability, carrying me along too. [. . .] This stranger with the white, thin hands, this gleaming cornet that as yet I hadn't even heard, intimately and enduringly now they were my possessions. (47)

Like Martha in "A Field of Wheat," who hopes that the bumper crop will bring back the feeling of "living at the heart of things" (74), the cornet has given Tom's quotidian world a new glossy dimension that is not even marred by his knowledge that he must explain, to his parents, both his choice of Philip as hired hand, and the missing oranges and the

gritty raisins occasioned by Rock's rampage. The living cornet that "transfigures" and "quicken" is the antithesis of the hot plushy parlour; it allows Tom to glimpse a "force" and a "current" in life that he has never before perceived emanating from his parlour. Ross uses the curious word "possessions" to describe how Tom feels about Philip and his cornet, as if he himself had made them, made them his own, something completely apart from his father's concern over the harvest or his mother's jealousy over her sister's motor-car. The promise would seem to be half-fulfilled that night when Philip plays for him, the notes filling up the sky, "piercing," "poignant and sheer," "like slow, suspended lightning," and to end the concert, a march that "said life was worth living and bright as morning shone ahead to show the way" (49). This music that fills the sky ushers Tom into a domain he had never known, one that in its marked outerness and otherness, contrasts radically with the inside music of the parlour.

Philip's music is not circumscribed enough to fit the family's parlour; in fact, it is too large to fit the farm at all. As Tom and both his parents know, Philip, indeed, does not fit the farm because he cannot stook and so he leaves the next day without fanfare. But Philip leaves something behind him, something that Ross chooses to express not simply as Tom's legacy, but, interestingly, his parents'. The father acknowledges the power of the cornet, even in the same breath as he berates the boy for Philip's unsuitability. The narrator, wiser

now than the young protagonist he once was, tells us that what occasions the father's reaction is "helplessness, though, not anger. Helplessness to escape his wheat when wheat was not enough, when something more than wheat had just revealed itself" (50). In the end, then, the wonder of Philip's musical gift, conveyed to the farm from a world outside of it, has been received even by the boy's father, however fleetingly experienced or grudgingly acknowledged.

Similarly, the final paragraph of the story is devoted to the mother's awareness of Philip's effect, and its contrast with the predictability and meagerness of the farm: "For she had been listening, too, and she may have understood. A harvest, however lean, is certain every year; but a cornet at night is golden only once" (51). The "understanding" that Ross suggests here is the fragile indicator that there may well be a way of connecting the two worlds of inner and outer, the world of the farm and the world of musical expression, without simply pushing the latter into the narrow confines of the parlour.

Just as the house often functions as garrison, a site of protection and safety and defence against the primacy lurking all around, so too does the barn or stable. Because in Ross's stories, it is associated with the male in the gender-divided nature of the farm, the barn is often the source of rare moments of male comfort or consolation. The barn is also a resonant place because, quite simply, it contains

animals, commonly in Ross's stories, horses, which are often also "associated with freedom, self-sufficiency, release, and sometimes male pride" (Carpenter 78). In "The Lamp at Noon," Paul escapes the site of endless argument--the house with Ellen--to the simple haven of the stable and the horse. The house is definitely not a sheltering place for the male farmer, as it is often the arena of discontent, the domestic space being a measure of the farm's relative success or failure. In an effort to temporarily escape that female domain, Paul fights his way across the windy yard, the passage into another realm not being easily achieved, and he enters the barn with its "deep hollow calm within, a vast darkness engulfed beneath the tides of moaning wind" (19). The description of the stable constructs it as distinctly church-like, and even though Paul recognizes this oasis as an illusion (soon the stable walls will be merely "a feeble stand" against "the assaulting wind") he, nevertheless, welcomes the temporary respite:

It was a long, far-reaching stillness. The first dim stalls and rafters led the way into cavern-like obscurity, into vaults and recesses that extended far beyond the stable walls. Nor in these first quiet moments did he forbid the illusion, the sense of release from a harsh, familiar world into one of peace and darkness. (19)

Like the haystack in "Not By Rain Alone," the escape into "peace and darkness" here is a womb-like retreat, a seeking of quiescence for

Paul. But the “cavern-like obscurity” and “far-reaching stillness” suggest more than the closeness of the womb. The feeling of resonant space is an escape but is also an entry into community. For the stable is not only the site of a distinctly sacred calm, but it also has its own God-head, in the form of the horse, with the ability to usher Paul into a separate psychological space, a space where he can receive tenderness and demonstrate compassion: “At a whinny from the bay mare, Bess, he went forward and into her stall. She seemed grateful for his presence, and thrust her nose deep between his arm and body. They stood a long time motionless, comforting and assuring each other” (19). The horse can be both work mate and lover, a situation uncomplicated by the bitterness of his other work mate and lover, his wife. Like one member of an embracing couple, Paul acts out the romantic role that is no longer available to him in his marriage. The description of his relationship with the horse is still more meaningful. She (the horse *is* female) calls to him and he responds. She is grateful that he is there. They stand together in what I would call an attitude of grace, but with a physical intensity, too, as the horse buries her nose into his body, abjecting herself and allowing him to do the same. They become a tableau of mutual need as they stand unmoving for a “long time,” allowing each other the intimacy of wordless ease. Paul’s acute need is made evident by Ross’s description of the temporary fulfillment he finds with his horse.

But horses offer more than solace to Paul. They also function as catalysts for him in understanding his feelings for Ellen. When Paul moves his hands over Prince, his old grey gelding, the horse's pronounced ribs and hipbones bring back Ellen's complaints. Paul feels "a sudden shame, a sting of fear that Ellen might be right in what she said. [. . .] nine years a farmer now on his own land, and still he couldn't even feed his horses? What, then, could he hope to do for his wife and son?" (20). Earlier, when they both stood in the house, Paul could not begin to fathom Ellen's complaint of feeling caged, but in the barn with the horses, he understands all at once that, unlike himself, she "had no faith or dream with which to make the dust and poverty less real" (20). Continuing on with his work, Paul grooms the horses, who again metamorphose into symbols of his wife and her suffering. Standing as they are, the horses are not symbols of freedom and movement, but instead remind Paul of Ellen's words: "He went from Prince to the other horses, combing their manes and forelocks with his fingers, but always it was her face before him, its staring eyes and twisted suffering. 'See Paul -- I stand like this all day. I just stand still [. . .]'" (20). The horses here, unlike the horses of Kroetsch's dichotomy, are almost paralyzed, a sign of the distress that Paul finally recognizes in his and Ellen's world. Horses are also functional, too, of course, doing the work of the farm, embodying the dogged and persevering spirit of farming, but here they figure poignantly in a more

intimate, personal, and symbolic way.

Similarly, in "A Field of Wheat," after the hail storm destroys John and Martha's crop, John, stricken, retreats to the barn, seeking, we soon discover, some solace or refuge. When Martha goes after him to pour out all her pent-up gall, she is brought up short by a strange sound:

She had not seen him the first time she passed because he was pressed against one of the horses, his head pushed into the big deep hollow of its neck and shoulder, one hand hooked by the fingers in the mane, his own shoulders drawn up and shaking. She stared, thrust out her head incredulously, moved her lips, but stood silent. John sobbing there, against the horse. It was the strangest, most frightening moment of her life. (81-82)

Like Paul and his mare, John and his horse are a couple engaged in a physical union that, in a world that enforces a code of stoical endurance, allows only a brief window of vulnerability. Martha is frightened by her discovery that John is, in fact, so wounded, so susceptible to failure. Compare this scene with a previous one, after the hail storm, when John comforts Martha for a moment before the children approach. It is again a scene in which a momentary intimacy startles, like a gaily-colored bird flying through a grey landscape. In desperation, Martha, at this moment, tells John that she cannot go on

after the devastation of the hail storm:

He laid his big hands on her shoulders. They looked at each other for a few seconds, then she dropped her head weakly against his greasy smock. Presently he roused her. 'Here come Joe and Annabelle!' The pressure of his hands tightened. His bristly cheek touched her hair and forehead. 'Straighten up, quick, before they see you!'

It was more of him than she had had for years. (80)

Connecting through head and hands, Martha is able to receive from John strength and reassurance, however awkward and temporary it is. Significantly, the children's appearance forces them both to pretend that this need does not exist, much as in the barn scene, when Martha senses, *knows*, she must not see her husband's stricken pain. John, his spirit broken, wants to be unnoticed when he seeks the consolation of his horse so as not to burden his family with human emotion. John must pretend that he never despairs, and Martha, further, must pretend that she has not seen his misery since, to her mind, it would be "unbearable to watch his humiliation" (82). The entire family's relationship is built on a kind of pride that does not allow them the "weakness" of depending upon others. Such stoicism also demands at times an emotional pretense, a pretense that can only be temporarily abandoned in occasional sanctuaries like the stable.

But the barn is an expansive site, too, serving as a place for

dreams, especially for children such as the little girl, Jenny, in "Circus in Town." When her brother brings home a fragment of a circus flyer that he has found in the town, Jenny experiences a "sudden dilation of life within her" (71), and is bewildered when her enthusiasm is met by her father's irritation and her mother's pity. To escape the turbulence of these swirling emotions, Jenny furtively takes the poster and spirits it away to the barn, her sacred place, almost a cathedral in its proportion and its properties: "a big, solemn loft, with gloom and fragrance and sparrows chattering against its vault of silence" (71). As in "A Field of Wheat," the barn is here sacrosanct, enlarging, but it is, for Jenny, also a place of fancy, a place where the circus can be fully realized in the imagination: "And there, in its dim, high stillness, she had her circus" (71). The sentence structure withholds the triumph of the circus that Jenny creates with her imagination until the end, at the same time as it cloaks it in mystery and grandeur, the dimness and stillness softening the abrasiveness of light and movement. The description signals the reader's entry into a fantasy world of matchless possibility, much like the world fashioned by a rhetorically-skilled ringmaster who must set not only the scene for the audience, but the mood as well.

Part of that world is suggested by Ross's signifying of time as something other than quotidian. One of the most significant signs occurs when Jenny first covers the kitchen calendar with the poster,

“blotting out the charted time that represents the daily routine of her parents’ farm” (Esterhammer 16). But when the house becomes full of her mother’s anger, her father’s confusion, and her brother’s exasperation, she must take her diversion away from that time entirely and remove the poster to the more welcoming space of the barn in order to indulge the fantasy without the obstruction of clocks and calendars which measure out time so systematically. The barn for her is not just solace, a temporary antidote for misery, as it has been for Paul and John; it is a sanctuary, virtually a suspended time, that permits creativity.

The barn is even more versatile as a site for Ross, sometimes taking on more disturbing qualities. The stable as a site of fancy develops a more menacing tone in “One’s a Heifer,” in which a boy is given his first real dose of adult responsibility when he is told to round up the family’s stray calves. Riding across snowy fields, he feels dispirited and comes to see himself as the object of an indifferent yet threatening gaze: the “cattle round the straw-stacks stared. . . [t]he fields stared, and the sky stared” (120). The portentous landscape is only a forerunner of what will come. The boy, believing he has sighted the yearlings, follows them to a dilapidated and unprepossessing yard where he meets a lone sinister farmer, Arthur Vickers. An omen is clear from the moment the boy sees the yard: “it was a poor shiftless-looking place. The yard was littered with old wagons and

machinery; the house was scarcely distinguishable from the stables. Darkness was beginning to close in, but there was no light in the windows" (121). The inability to distinguish between house and barn should have sent the boy high-tailin' to the horizon, cattle or no cattle. Vickers, as we soon discover, may well be crazy, but even he understands the incongruity of the house that looks more like a shed, as he twice apologizes to the boy for the state of his house and his lack of hospitality. Vickers' is a farm turned upside down, as there is an animal (the owl) in the house, while Vickers' former *housekeeper* is, or may well be, in the barn (the narrator teases us with this possibility). The menace of the merging and confused sites finally spills out into the decrepit figure of the farmer as he attacks the boy at the end in an apparent effort to keep the barn's secret safe.

As disconcerting as Vickers' possible crime is (and it is explored with alacrity by critics like Whitman and Chapman²), it is the relationship between the stable and the boy that is most intriguing here. At one point, when the boy is imagining himself creeping out to the barn during the night so that he can steal away with his purloined calves, he falls into a dream in which the impossible and possible come together. The stable is guarded by the crippled owl, which the boy has seen in Vickers' house, and Tim, the boy's horse, becomes a talking horse. In his dream, the boy realizes that it is not, in fact, the calves

that he is looking for at all (130), but the enigma that the stable represents. The next morning, when he spooks one of Vickers' horses so that he can investigate the closed stall unbothered by Vickers, his compulsion is clear. As he frantically struggles to get the bolts open at the threshold, he realizes that he is not afraid of the farmer, even though the boy knows he will return at any moment, but of the stall itself. Ross underscores this point through repetition as he describes the boy's being too overwhelmed to carefully aim at the resisting bolt:

Terrified of the stall though, not of Vickers. Terrified of the stall, yet compelled by a frantic need to get inside. For the moment I had forgotten Vickers, forgotten even the danger of his catching me. I worked blindly, helplessly, as if I were confined and smothering. (132-133)

The possibility that the stall does indeed contain the missing calves, or even the more sinister possibility of a frozen corpse, is really only a red herring. The boy's paradoxical reaction, his simultaneous repulsion from and attraction to the inside, is the clue to reading the stable as dangerous enigma. The boy is driven to reveal the contents of the stable even though he dreads the revelation. The stable, elsewhere in Ross a familiar site of safety, sanctuary, repose, and creativity, suddenly reveals itself in "One's a Heifer" as a black hole.

Occasionally Ross uses even the barn as a symbol of constraint. In a lovely scene in "The Outlaw," a boy is finally goaded into riding the

“beautiful but dangerous” (24) renegade horse that his father has bought at an auction sale. In this story, the horse as lover rears its head again when Isabel, the horse, is described in adventurous and romantic terms by the boy, who mingles his own heroic image with what he constructs as hers, even as she stands, tied to her stall within the barn. His youth and romantic inclinations allow him to easily extrapolate from one tethered farm horse to a great world filled with grand and wild equine beasts:

She was one horse, and she was all horses. Thundering battle chargers, fleet Arabians, untamed mustangs -- sitting beside her on her manger I knew and rode them all. [. . .] Conquest and carnage, trumpets and glory -- she understood, and carried me triumphantly. (25)

The boy (who interestingly remains nameless while the horse emerges in his extravagant naming as the temptress she is) imagines Isabel as a heroic warrior, and himself as an integral part of that heroic duo, as he rides “them all,” presumably even the “untamed mustangs.” Even the normally practical father shies away from making Isabel into a plough horse and breaking her spirit. Spirit indeed, as she is also related to those other Ross horses at the centre of the sacred barn. The boy observes, somewhat sententiously, that there “were moments when I felt the whole stable charged with her, as if she were the priestess of her kind, in communion with her deity” (25).

Repeatedly warned against trying to ride her, the boy sees Isabel as a captive in her stall, and indeed himself as a captive to his parents' limiting expectations. The boy finally finds, in the form of Millie Dickson, a classmate whom he wants to impress, the impetus to try riding Isabel. The feat turns out to be as exhilarating as he expected. Boy and horse race across the winter prairie, the improbability and ecstasy of the adventure slowly crystallizing in the boy's mind just as the frost bite crystallizes his ears, in a moment characteristic of Ross's irony. When the boy and horse pause for breath before returning home, Isabel "breathed in rapturously" the prairie's "loping miles of freedom" (30). Through the horse, the boy, significantly, is not delivered into the scenes of heroic battle he has imagined, but instead is sensitized to see his prairie through different eyes:

And I too, responsive to her bidding, was aware as never before of its austere, unrelenting beauty. There were the white fields and the blue, metallic sky; the little splashes here and there of yellow straw stack, luminous and clear as drops of gum on fresh pine lumber; the scattered farmsteads brave and wistful in their isolation; the gleam of sun and snow. (30)

The scene the boy experiences has all the markings of a painting. He sees his familiar world with a persistent clarity that renders it unfamiliar, the prairie hard and brilliant with color, and the tenuous

position of the farm in the middle of that blinding white winter canvas.

And yet, he lapses, or tries to lapse into his earlier narrative in which he plays a heroic role: "I wanted none of it, but she insisted. Thirteen years old and riding an outlaw -- naturally I wanted only that. I wanted to indulge shamelessly my vanity, to drink the daring and success of my exploit in full-strength draughts" (30). The boy's determination to preserve his romantic narrative collapses once again, however, in response to the horse's determination: "Isabel, like a conscientious teacher at a fair, dragging you off to see instructive things, insisted on the landscape" (30). Landscape, which is to say a representation of land, is what the boy really sees for the first time, not the everyday world that he works and plays in, nor the world of grandeur he dreams about, but that real-but-imagined world that coexists beside the quotidian. A threshold has just materialized before him and Isabel makes sure he recognizes it, forcing the boy's attention outward upon the prairie when all he wants is to exult in the rashness and success of his own daring: "Look, she said firmly, while it's here before you, so that to the last detail it will remain clear. For you, too, some day there may be stalls and halters, and it will be a good memory" (30). The boy's joyride across the prairie has been transfiguring, a colorized journey into his previously black-and-white place. Isabel, the boy understands, insists on the landscape as a lesson in relativity. He, too, might someday feel the constraints of

society, just as Isabel feels the chafing of halters and the smallness of stalls, and need to remember the lesson of the prairie, its potential as visionary landscape, its stunning beauty when seen with a loving and painterly eye.

Ross paints another kind of barn lesson in "The Runaway," a story in which the stable functions, among other things, as a site of vengeance. The unscrupulous Luke Taylor, possessor of the barn in question, sells a pair of his beautiful Black Diamond mares to his neighbor, who is eager for the excitement and glamor they might offer. The horses represent the youth and color that over time the prairie has bleached out of the narrator's parents. Even though the father well knows Luke Taylor is a cheat, the lure of the horses is too great for him to ignore once his need has found its expression in two glossy imperious beasts. The narrator explains the full extent of the horses' role as both parents primp for what will be the inaugural trip to town with the new horses:

My father, driving up to the door with a reckless flourish of the whip, was so jaunty and important, and above the pebbly whirl of wheels as the Diamonds plunged away there was such a girlish peal of laughter from my mother! They were young again. My father had a team of Diamonds, and my mother had something that his envious passion for them had taken from her twenty years ago. (86)

The mother here is another example of the woman who, typically in Ross, has seen romance and virtually all possibilities for a larger and a more gratifying life, blown away, diverted into land and beast. And like all too-good-to-be-true romances, this one, too, is shattered by the discovery that the horses are balky, in other words, prone to coming to a dead stop and refusing to go on.

The resolution comes in a moment of poetic justice when the terrified horses with a load of fiery hay run back to their original barn, destroying barn, horses, and Luke Taylor in one fell swoop. The mother insists on reading the horses' return as an act of moral retribution, announcing that what has gone around has now come around. But she does not see that the barn is a more ambiguous symbol than her vision of simple retribution can account for.

For Luke Taylor, his "big red hip-roofed barn" (85) is a status symbol in the neighborhood, one that complements his grey stone house, complete with indoor plumbing. The ostentatious wealth of the Taylors is not lost on the neighbors, notably the young narrator's family, despite their best efforts to ignore it. As the boy says,

Riding past the Taylor place it had always been a point of honour with me to keep my eyes fixed straight ahead, disdainfully, yet somehow the details of the barnyard and the aspect of the buildings had become as familiar to me as our own. My scorn had never been quite innocent of

envy. (84)

The barn, especially as it houses others of the coveted Diamonds, becomes a focal point for the whole community, as it does in the final scene in which all the neighbors converge and frantically work to save it from the flames. When Luke runs into his barn to save his precious horses,

the floor of the loft collapsed. It was as if when running through the door he had sprung a trap, the way the great, billowy masses of burning hay plunged down behind him. There were tons and tons of it. The air caught it as it fell, and it blazed up throbbing like a furnace. We put our hands to our faces before the heat, and fell back across the yard. (97)

Luke has crossed the threshold, into the barn, and indeed sprung a fiery trap of his own making. In Ross's language, there is a hint of cosmic justice. But the argument for retribution is not convincing for the son or the father who, at the end of the story, are thinking of all the horses that died horribly in that barn: "What kind of reckoning was it that exacted life and innocence for an old man's petty greed? Why, if it was retribution, had it struck so clumsily?" (98). But even those sentiments fade at the end when the father visibly brightens as his wife reminds him of future possibilities, the spectacle of his own fine barn filled with the capable progeny of his own balky, but

potentially fecund, Diamonds. As Carpenter notes, while the dialogue at the end of the story is about the death of innocent animals, the tone of the ending “moves like an undertow in the opposite direction, away from any possibility of tragedy” (76). The vanity of the barn will live on.

I have been arguing that the movement between house, barn, and field allows Ross to build stories around grim subject matter without throwing his readers into pits of despondency. The sites are variable in their potential to stand for certain things like safety, constraint, or creativity. We have seen the house become an invaded garrison, a source of comfort and stability, and a hothouse of artistic pretension. As for the barn, it has been the site of solace, creativity, fancy, frightening secrecy, and constraint. The field has functioned as a place of misguided management, comfort, escape, reverent calm, and tremendous folly. It has not been my intention to declare what each site might symbolize in an effort to crystallize the effect of the agricultural site across a variety of stories. Indeed, what makes agricultural sites so fascinating, in authors such as Ross, is their flexibility, the movement among them and the various events that occur at the threshold. Through an examination of these sites, many aspects of the agricultural myth can be seen to persist, even in stories that are far from conventional pastoral, as in this collection.

By examining these sites, one can more clearly see how a reader can come away from Ross's stories with hope and renewal, not because the characters are triumphant (most are not), but because Ross has choreographed this delicate ballet with considerable artistry, and has himself been triumphant in bringing life to these characters and this land.

Notes

¹ In this example, we can see to what extent Ross's fiction is beholden to the conventions of naturalism. Like Martha and John, many of Ross's characters seem to be passive victims of large impersonal forces.

² F.H. Whitman argues that "there is no grounds for believing that the stall contains anything" (168) and that such ponderings are an "impediment to any appreciation of what the story--a study of illusion--is about" (169). Marilyn Chapman, on the other hand, argues that it is not implausible to suppose that the girl does exist in the barn, but that, in the end, there is no way to determine exactly what is an illusion and what is not.

Chapter 2

Dirt-doctoring in *Who Has Seen the Wind*

If Ross's short stories have suffered perhaps from pessimistic readings, W.O. Mitchell's most well-known novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, might well be described as suffering from too many overly optimistic readings. Many critics have given it short shrift because of the romantic or comic aspects of the story. Some readers are dismissive, for example, of certain plot machinations, such as how readily the villainous Mrs. Abercrombie is vanquished at the school board meeting, or how conveniently Saint Sammy brings down a divine wind storm on to the mean-spirited Bent Candy's shiny new barn. Some critics are uneasy with the so-called happy ending or the seemingly simple opposition of prairie to town. Many readers, as Dick Harrison says, are blinded to the darker implications of the novel by the "gently ironic tone, sonorous, cadenced voice, and unfailing felicity of expression [that] produces a reassuring narrative presence" (*Intimations* 27). *Who Has Seen the Wind* has generated an array of critical responses including dismissal, high praise, indifference, and confusion--but much of it has concerned the treatment of innocence and nature.

To add to this confusion, some of these critics may have never read Mitchell's full and preferred text of the novel. Two versions were

published in 1947--one by Macmillan in Canada and one by Little, Brown in the United States. Most versions of the novel have been based on the more optimistic and significantly shorter version of the American Little, Brown publication (shorter by approximately 7,000 words). Not until 1991 was the longer version revived when McClelland & Stewart published an illustrated edition based on the original Macmillan text.

Barbara Mitchell outlines the major deletions made by the American publisher to Mitchell's text. According to her, Edward Weeks, Mitchell's editor, made cuts in three main areas--the wind motif, the relationship between Brian and the Young Ben, and the character of Brian himself (11-12). More specifically, Weeks wanted Mitchell to cut the opening line (the line that has become one of the most recognizable in Canadian literature) because he thought it "dull." He also asked Mitchell to jettison the overnight haystack scene, and the final lyrical passage describing the prairie, arguing that the novel should end with the boy and not the wind. Mitchell argued passionately for the inclusion of these passages and others, many of which he considered key. Though he was successful in keeping those noted above, he lost many others, including, according to Barbara Mitchell, "some thirty landscape descriptions": "Weeks tended to remove those of a less pleasant-sounding nature such as the initial description of the town as 'a clotting of frame houses'" (B. Mitchell 12). Some passages, as well, involving the agrarian and prairie aspects of the novel were cut, such

as Brian's imitation of Sean's language and manner. Weeks also objected to the Young Ben's depiction as a mysterious prairie figure, wanting him to be more like a "real boy," a position that also weakened the tenuous and evocative relationship that Mitchell was trying to create for Brian and his alter-ego, the Young Ben, who hovers almost wraith-like on the horizon of Brian's world.

The major loss to the novel affected the wind motif. Weeks cut about twenty passages that involved the wind in all its voices, from the lulling to the manic, and the accompanying dark/light patterns that give the novel a sense of balance. As Barbara Mitchell says, the effect of these deletions was "to disrupt the contrapuntal effect, the balancing of the dualities of light *and* dark, birth *and* death, caressing *and* avenging wind, human *and* prairie voice, insight *and* incomprehension" (13). Even some scenes that Mitchell succeeded in keeping were shortened to the detriment of the novel. For instance, from a larger scene in which Brian tries to evoke his transcendental feeling in church, and cannot, Weeks cut almost a page of description that, Barbara Mitchell tell us, "emphasizes the other side, the dark and indeterminate aspect of Brian's quest" (15). From the passage in which Brian holes up overnight in a haystack, Weeks cut several sentences that related to Brian's feeling of being alone in the midst of a gigantic uncaring universe. According to Barbara Mitchell, because of editorial pressure, W.O. reluctantly added the rather heavy-handed

“message” of the preface in which he makes it clear that he intends the wind to be “symbolic of Godhood,” feeling that he had to make explicit what he was not being allowed to make implicit through the novel.

Overall, as Barbara Mitchell says, “Mitchell felt that Weeks was skewing the balance by deleting the darker descriptions,” preferring “a more sunny, upbeat tone to the novel, ending with Brian, the ‘comic’ hero whose happy future would be firmly spelled out” (17). Harrison has described Weeks’ cuts as “attempts to assimilate *Who Has Seen the Wind* to an American popular tradition of romantic primitivism” (*Intimations* 79). Whatever the case, part of the effect of Weeks’ shortening of the text (in part so that it could be sold for a competitive \$2.50) was the dilution of some of the darker, more pessimistic aspects of Brian’s development. The shortened version weakened the role of the agrarian prairie in positioning a person “playing his life out against the vast, incomprehensible universe” so as “to create a tone akin to that of Conrad and Hardy” (B. Mitchell 17). In this chapter, therefore, I will be referring to the 1991 McClelland & Stewart version, which maintains Mitchell’s original and preferred text.

Mitchell often spoke of how the prairie had influenced him as a person and as a writer. In an interview with Donald Cameron, he calls it a place that creates “mystics”:

people who, without being aware of it, in some strange way

are in tune with wind and grass and sky. Subsequent education, including great interest and study in philosophy and closed systems, never did really make me a rational animal. At least I had not the faith in reason as the way to truth without an appreciation of the intuitive route. (61)

Mitchell believed that a person is imprinted by a particular landscape during a crucial early time, what his narrator in *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* refers to as the “litmus years.”¹ Walking out onto the prairie, the narrator of that novel says, “Here was the melodramatic part of the earth’s skin that had stained me during my litmus years, fixing my inner and outer perspective, dictating the terms of the fragile identity contract I would have with my self for the rest of my life” (10). Mitchell’s conception of the artist also springs from this idea of a concrete place:

Whatever art illusion the writer creates, the bubble he blows simply has to grow out of the fact that he inhabits a certain place upon the skin of the earth and a certain point in time. [. . .] To me, the main justification for art is that it grows out of the unique and individual human being, and that when the art experience happens between a creative artist and a creative partner, it is probably the closest a human can ever come to truly crossing a bridge to another

human. (Cameron 51)

Mitchell describes this creative partner as the reader/spectator who actively crosses the threshold of the artistic act, making not only something that is richer than what existed before, but something that generates from the effort of individuals the very prairie notion of community.

Mitchell's interest in community often surfaces in his role as a performer. Mitchell's penchant for showmanship often garnered him the label of hick, a role that he played with some relish. When asked by David O'Rourke about his character, Jake, from the *Jake and the Kid* stories, Mitchell observes: "there's a lot of me in Jake, I guess. And then a lot of it is illusion so you hide your footprints and everything else. This may explain why so many people equate me with a folksy old Foothills fart and Jake, you know, which I ain't" (157). Mitchell tries to strike a balance between fact and fiction, both in his work and his own image. But, as W.J. Keith notes, Mitchell cannot resist being the "folksy fart," his "I ain't" effectively confirming the mask "even in the process of denying the identification" ("Litmus" 53).

Many critics struggle not only with defining Mitchell's persona, but with finding a category for his writing. His *Jake and the Kid* series, originally written as magazine stories in the 1940s, evolved into radio shows in the 1950s. They then transmogrified into enormously

popular television programs in the 1960s and 1990s, but all of the versions were well-received, regardless of the format. In the preface to *According to Jake and the Kid*, published in 1989, Mitchell looks back on the stories and strikes a nostalgic note about their effect: "With the increase of farm mechanization came another casualty, and of them all it seems the most shocking disappearance from the western landscape. Like the top soil of the Dirty Thirties, the hired man has drifted away" (ix). David Latham also comments on the hired hand who "has lost his place in other people's families. The hired man once turned the nuclear family into a community; the tractor leaves the nuclear family in isolation" (34). Nevertheless, the *Jake* stories were, for the most part, simple comical pieces that recall a more pastoral Canada, which is to take nothing away from them, for their simplicity and their comedy were seriously crafted. But they also lacked the darker edge that drove Mitchell's first novel and that made *Who Has Seen the Wind* a fuller and more balanced agrarian story.

Who traces the early life of Brian O'Connal growing up in a small town and most of the novel's action is set in town or at the edge of town. Despite this setting, the novel leaves the impression of being an intensely rural story. Brian's coming-of-age experiences are all set against the backdrop of the "skeleton requirements" of "land and sky" (3). His moments of a deeper consciousness, when he experiences what he calls "the feeling," are almost all associated with the natural

world, but are most frequent and “most exquisite upon the prairie” (136) that surrounds the small town. His world of sensual experience includes, at various times, drops of dew on a leaf, a dead pigeon, a tailless gopher, a two-headed calf, the Young Ben, and Saint Sammy, the eccentric farmer who burrows in a nest of wool and twine inside a piano box on the prairie. For Brian, all of these things at one point or another become temporary windows into a previously untapped and mysterious level of experience. Whenever Brian wants to unravel the twisted threads of his life, he walks out on to the prairie, into the suggestive canvas of the land. The natural world, especially the limitless prairie just beyond the town, becomes his outlet and his solace and his mystery.

Robert Thacker argues that Brian develops in parallel with the land, his “transformation as one with the prairie” coming in a “symbiotic connection” (209). He goes further to say that Brian’s maturation suggests “that man must adapt to its [the prairie’s] cycles” (209). While the land certainly functions as a complex touchstone to Brian’s growth, Thacker’s insistence that the point of the novel is that Brian must live harmoniously with nature, is too pat an answer for what is a complicated rendering of humanity and land.

Who both begins and ends with the prairie, as was Mitchell’s declared wish. Mitchell’s opening line does not describe the false-fronted streets of the town, but rather “the least common

denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky--Saskatchewan prairie" (3). David Latham notes the dualities here: the "first analogy is arithmetical: a clean, reductive image of the prairie as 'the least common denominator of nature.' The second analogy is anatomical: the harsh reality of land and sky identified as the bare bones of brush and bush" (24). Mitchell "worked hard for a quality of dualism" in *Who* (B. Mitchell 16), a dualism that exists in that first sentence. But Latham's focus on the reductive bare bones of Mitchell's opening is itself misleading. Even the least common denominator, arithmetically, is an inclusive concept, not a reductive one. Mitchell is painting a wide canvas, a backdrop so large and encompassing that it will be able to support his narrative with all its dark and light features. Latham's "bare bones of brush and bush" might alliterate nicely, but its meaning is rather obscure. Mitchell begins with a skeleton, not to suggest that nothing else exists, but as a strong support for the flesh of his story.

The opening images may suggest a generalized landscape with their spareness, but, at the same time, they locate a reader specifically on *Saskatchewan* prairie. The narrative voice in the opening lines of *Who*, like a kind of camera panning across the setting, next meanders over the prairie from wind to clouds, then down to cattle standing beside dried-up sloughs, and then, with growing purpose, to the river where, finally, it allows itself to be taken to town (4). Mitchell also provides a

prairie soundtrack of humming telephone wires, “cricketing” grasshoppers, singing meadow larks, and squeaking gophers.

The illustrations that appeared with *Who* in 1976 link the book strongly to the prairie as well. The 1991 edition, illustrated by William Kurelek, features his painting, *Harvest Train in Manitoba*, on the cover, an iconic farm scene, including hay wagons and men stooking, meant to represent the novel (though, truth to be told, there is not one harvesting scene in the novel). The illustrations by William Kurelek are interesting in other ways. Two critics, Muriel Whitaker and Perry Nodelman, have remarked on the grimness of many of the full-page illustrations in the text, a grimness that is sometimes not apparently obvious, but is brought out more strongly by the accompanying text or by a more thoughtful perusal of the picture itself. All of the full-page color illustrations are outdoor scenes with the exception of one which shows the interior of a barn, a situation that again suggests that even though the novel’s action is mostly in, or at the edge of, the town, the overwhelming feeling of the novel is agrarian or rural. Further, the fact that the “pictures are astonishingly and unremittingly grim” (Nodelman 226), focussing as they do on boys setting out to drown gophers or adults under the cover of night arranging the genocide of rabbits, is not so astonishing when one considers the text as a whole. Like the superficial and much-espoused idealism of the text, the pictures with their bright colors and simple lines also seem to tell a

more nostalgic tale than they really do. Whitaker uses the example of the picture of the tired farmer coming home with his horses. In the upper left corner, a hawk hangs suspended in the air, the same hawk in the text that will suddenly swoop down, bringing “galvanic death” (73) to a gopher below. That feeling of impending doom in an otherwise contemplative scene exists in many of Kurelek’s illustrations, making them a fitting way to “support some key aspects of the novel itself” (Nodelman 228).

Mitchell repeatedly uses complex images of the land in his setting, the “heartbreaking” (19) decade of the 1930s, to set mood or further characterization. For instance, when the pigeon dies, Brian, in his instinctual sense of what is fitting, insists that it should be buried “not with the houses,” but “where the boy is” (71), the Young Ben being Brian’s intermediary between nature and people, as well as a symbolic figure, who, in many ways, embodies the prairie, moving and acting as its spirit. Brian’s father is puzzled by his son’s insistence that the prairie is “his,” the Young Ben’s that is, but for Brian, the Young Ben is like a coyote, an animal completely at home in this broad mysterious world. When Brian first sees the Young Ben with his “high stooking cheeks” (87), a sure feature of agrarian prairie, he is not at all surprised by the incongruity of a boy appearing in the middle of the prairie: “he simply accepted the boy’s presence out here as he had accepted that of the gopher and the hawk and the dragon-fly” (14).

Later Brian will seek his father's assurance that he, Brian, is a "prairie boy" (45), aligning himself in his mind with the natural world and the "prairie boy" he knows, the Young Ben, with the "prairie hair" who "has wind on him all the time" (25).

Mitchell uses specifically agrarian images to suggest Brian's growing awareness of his place in the natural world. After burying the pigeon on the prairie, Brian watches as sheet lightning "quickly blotted" out the "pygmy farm buildings [that] stood out momentarily" on the "world's dark rim" (72). Two days later, Brian lies with his new pup in his arms, and notices how every "grass blade and leaf and flower seemed to be breathing, or perhaps, whispering--something to him--something for him" (72). Mitchell's description then wanders off, following a dust devil as it spirals out on to the prairie where a lone farmer is coming home after a day in the fields just at the verge of sunset:

Leaning slightly backward against the reins looped round his waist, a man walks homeward from the fields. The horses' heads move gently up and down; their hooves drop tired sound; the jingle of the traces swinging at their sides is clear against the evening hush. The stubble crackles; a killdeer calls. Stooks, fences, horses, man, have clarity that was not theirs throughout the day. (73)

The twilight image unites person and animal and landscape in a

symbiotic relationship. After the hectic demands of the day, this borderline time gives a precision to the land in which stooks, fences, horses and man have all become roughly equivalent in the visionary landscape. The threshold image captures a strange quality of light and sound and experience that echoes Brian's "soft explosion of feeling[. . .] of completion and of culmination" (72).

But while *Who* is an agrarian story, it does not simply privilege prairie over town. Even so, many critics, such as Whitaker, have insisted on outlining a clear division between the two worlds. Whitaker characterizes the "circumscribed" town as "a prison of bigotry and cruelty" juxtaposed with the "transcendental affirmation" of the natural world where Brian gets his "feelings" (*Voice* 288). Similarly, Warren Tallman describes Brian's "attempts to reconcile himself to the human viciousness and natural desolation which characterize the town and the prairie" (8). But the evidence of the novel would seem to point in a different direction for, despite Mitchell's enormous sympathy for the land, and those who are intimately connected with it, he does not establish a distinct division between the agrarian world and the town. In fact, on the second page of the novel, the narrator explicitly describes the town as an organic entity, having arisen directly out of the soil: "A clotting of frame houses inhabited by some eighteen hundred souls, the town had grown up on either side of the river from the seed of one homesteader's sod hut built in the spring of

eighteen-seventy-five" (4). In Mitchell's vocabulary, the town is introduced as an organic feature of a larger more-inclusive agrarian world, growing from the first seed of settlement. Mitchell's larger vision of a world that can include prairie and town is revealed by the flexibility with which he can describe the town in agrarian terms, then, but it is evident too in the facility with which he can describe the prairie in urban terms. When a goshawk kills a gopher, the gopher is "a tan burgher no more to sit amid his city's gained heaps and squeak a question to the wind" (73). In another passage describing the beginning of spring, Mitchell relates the events of town and country in random order, squeezing the calving and lambing in between Mrs. Funder's new baby (116), in effect, treating the births--human and animal, urban and rural--in much the same way and implying, therefore, that the events are scarcely distinguishable. It is evident, then, that Mitchell is flexible in blurring the line between town and prairie.

Seeing the town and country as clear opposites only simplifies a complex situation. Ken Mitchell warns us to "avoid the tendency to see the conflict as one of rural innocence versus urban corruption" ("Universality" 39). As he points out, the Ben and Bent Candy, two of the chief rural characters, are hardly laudable characters; nor are the two town teachers, Digby and Miss Thompson, villains, to say the least. A more useful strategy is one suggested by Harrison: "Brian's most significant experiences in fact occur not in the town or on the prairie

but at the point of contact between the two, nature's order and man's" (*Unnamed* 178). The threshold in prairie writing, and in Mitchell's work too, is rich with possibility, as we have seen, and as Brian finds at the literal edge between town and prairie when, as a four-year-old, the street abruptly stops in front of him and he wades out through "hip-deep grass" (13). Later, when he starts school, he experiences the figurative threshold of this life experience that is also on that literal margin, the school yard being on the "prairie edge" (82).

The town and farm are linked economically and socially, as well. At harvest time, the streets of the town fill with the industry and the intensity of people coming to work on the land. Mitchell's detailed account of this time is almost carnivalesque in its description of a parade that is at once sombre and hopeful:

It was an urgent time of the year for the town, whose livelihood depended upon the prairie [. . .] tractors hauled threshing machines with feeders turned back upon themselves, linked to cook cars and followed in turn by the wheeled half-cylinders of water wagons. Empty and full, high, spreading grain wagons passed through on grinding wheels; long caterpillars of grain freights often blocked Main Street with their slow passage for minutes at a time.

(77-78)

Even after years of drought that leaves fields "thinly stroked with the

meagre stooks of lean times" (77), and the futility of harvesting wheat that will only get twenty-five cents a bushel when it cost thirty cents a bushel to grow, harvest still has the effect of bringing together people, including those who are 'foreign' and local, urban and rural, as a community for a specific purpose:

Strange men swung down from the trains, their blanket rolls slung over one shoulder, bright flannel shirts open at the neck, their lean faces dark with coal dust. They stood before the beer parlour of the Royal Hotel, in front of Drew's Pool Hall, or on the bank corner, waiting for the farmers who came into town, looking for bundle pitchers, spikers, and team skimmers. (78)

Here, the line between the farm and the town becomes especially blurred as the town becomes a hub of social activity at harvest time.

In even less hectic seasons, the town and agrarian worlds live in a strangely symbiotic union. "Judge" Mortimer, for example, holds court in the upper portion of the town hall over the stabled horses of Jake Harris, where he presides over the Ben's case: "Here, seated at a fumed oak desk, amid the pervading sweetness of alfalfa, hay and green feed -- soothed by the smell of horses' bodies, touched with just a tint of ammonia -- the "Judge" dispensed Justice" (280). The rural presence that mingles the worlds of plants and animals offers a seductive comfort, a kind of agrarian aromatherapy. But as often

happens, Mitchell's comedy tempers the nostalgia, again with an agrarian touch, as the "Judge" sentences the Ben by flipping haphazardly through a spring mail-order catalogue and setting the number of days of the Ben's jail time according to the price of a harness he discovers listed there.

Even some of the town characters are marked in ways as agrarian, or are associated with that world. Consider Milt Palmer, shoe- and harness-maker, philosophizing "under sheets of leather and hung rawhide saddle trees" (149). Mr. Thorborn, the school board chairman and owner of the livery stable, exercises his team of horses, his "special pride" with "manes flying, forefeet flickering delicately in the out-and-out rhythm that belongs to pacers" (195). At the school board meeting in which Mrs. Abercrombie is putting pressure on Digby, Thorborn, in his reluctance, finds himself thinking about working with finicky horses as opposed to finicky people:

He looked down at the papers on the desk before himself, shuffled them uncomfortably a moment. With horses things were simpler; a horse was either a gentle horse, or a snuffy horse; pretty nearly always the latter could be brought around to one's way of thinking. If not--it could be sold. (309)

This, unfortunately, does not appear to be an option in handling Mrs. Abercrombie, who seems lamentably separated from the rural domain

of horses.

Few others are as devoid of such connections. Even Brian's grandmother, who, especially at the beginning of the novel, seems most at odds with Sean and the world of the farm, tells a maturing Brian stories of her homesteading days. As she grows older and her agrarian past becomes more distant, it becomes, conversely, uppermost in her mind. She sees herself and John, her young husband, in the wagon as it rolls out to their homestead in her mind's eye. She tells her grandsons about her husband killing a bob-cat and making it into a cushion with tassels. She gives life to their grandfather by describing how he could give life to the prairie with his music, how he "could fiddle the squeak of a gopher, lost in wind whispering through prairie grass [. . .] Jack rabbits bouncing off, a goshawk drifting high with a field mouse in its claws [. . .] a barn with its loft full of hay" (209). Brian, offered this residual culture, grows closer to his grandmother. As Harrison says, the grandmother's stories "have a ritual quality [. . .] enacting the emotional significance of the pioneer life for all who have come after" (*Intimations* 70). Brian's grandmother, like other agrarian town characters, serves to unite town and prairie.

The exchange between town and country is not unlike what one might expect of such a time and place, when the boundaries between small towns and surroundings were ambivalent. Nevertheless, this

agrarian-town setting offers to Mitchell and to his readers stimulating possibilities that can exist at the margins of such communities. In this vein, Mitchell offers us some fine ripe agrarian characters, farmers that walk with a foot on either side of the divide. Brian's Uncle Sean is only the most conspicuous of these figures. With his "deep and booming voice," his "broad barn-door build" and his "great, untidy red moustaches stained with tobacco juice" (127), he is larger than life, a figure out of a tall tale. Mitchell plays at making him into a stereotype of the crude, spittin', cussin' hick. For example, in the comic altercations between Sean and his hired hand, Ab (whose sole aim is to convert his employer to his own brand of evangelical Christianity), Sean's character seems ludicrously fixed: "If ever a man cursed, or smoked, or drank, it was Sean O'Connal; an oath, a pipe, or the rawness of liquor was constantly in his mouth" (129). These characteristics, along with Sean's propensity for colorful stories and language, set him apart from Brian's domestic world, especially the female world of probity inhabited by his mother and grandmother. Little wonder that Brian, as a young boy, sees the gulf that exists between his uncle and his grandmother. And so, when Sean objects to the middy that the grandmother is making for Brian, Brian looks "up to his Uncle's face with plain worship in his eyes" (18).

Sean is an agrarian figure who is not isolated on the farm, but one who moves easily around the important sites in the story, inviting our

interest, as we see him through the eyes of his hero-worshipping nephew and the rest of his family. Sean's stories create in Brian, a "town kid," an appreciation for that which lies beyond his doorway, for Sean is also earnest about the land and the art of farming. Early in the novel, Sean tells Brian the story of the little County Down man, picking his teeth with the hair of a crocus, riding west on a grasshopper. The story, calculated to suit the age and the innocence of the young Brian, shows him the history of his place--the immigrants coming from across the sea, the hanging of "Looie Riel," the westward building of the CPR--but mostly Sean's story suggests to him a secret and mysterious world that lies just beyond the one he sees around him. In that nearly distant place, a little man in "two-inch overalls" can pop out of a gopher hole in Sean's "south forty" and lament the squandering of the land that has become so poor that it gives him "the heartburn!" (18-19).

As vivid as Sean is, he never, I think, becomes just a caricature whose only purpose is humor. Mitchell avoids the hick factor by also endowing Sean with wisdom and an expressiveness to show it: "His language hypnotized, but not with the monotony that is in most men's swearing; Sean's flow was agile and expressive, particularly when he was angry" (127). It is convincing, therefore, when D.G. Jones makes the point that Sean is "not only an embodiment of the land, but an active and intelligent human being concerned to preserve and cultivate

it" (38). Sean is not only a teller of tales, but a farmer struggling with conditions that seem, in Mitchell's words, out of his control: "In the course of the drought years Sean had changed from a bewildered man watching dry winds lick up the top soil from his land, to a man with a message. He was the keeper of the Lord's Vineyard, literally" (20). As such, he is a man prone to "evangelistic denunciations" (20) of poor farming practices, such as continuous cropping, that strip the top soil off the land. He finds an appreciative audience in his nephew, Brian, who stares "open-mouthed" (21) at the spectacle of his uncle as he castigates farmers who do not deserve the name. Sean's speech combines the ebb and flow of his passion with the details of his argument--that farmers should avoid putting in the same crop year after year, that they should diversify by raising animals, and that they should take a year-round responsibility for their land:

They never heard a strip farming' an' they don't wanta hear! Plant yer crops, I tell 'em, in strips acrosst the prevailin' winds -- fight the wind an' fight the driftin' -- stop clawin' her plumb back fer wheat or oats or barley or flax! Farm her with yer hearts an' brains, you stubble-jumpin' sons a hunyacks! Git off yer black prats an' raise some pigs an' cattle too! Forget yer goddam little red tractors [. . .] . (20)

Sean may drop his *g*'s, but his rhetoric is commanding and inspiring.

Even when the grandmother tries to stem the flood of Sean's discourse and spirit Brian away, the boy remains "under the hypnotic influence of his Uncle's voice" (21), entranced by both the style and the substance of his harangue. Sean is not merely talking about his own work as a farmer but the responsibilities of farmers in general to their profession. Sean is scathing when it comes to those who farm unthinkingly, scratching aimlessly at their fields, then travelling unconcernedly in the winter while their top soil does the same. Sean's tirade also attacks the dislocation between the farmer and his land through the mechanization of the tractor. Sean knows of what he speaks and, moreover, he is not afraid to defend the art of farming in front of an admiring nephew.

After Sean repeatedly watches his crops burn up under the unrelenting sun, he then, for variety, gets to watch a deluge of rain drown the wilted brown wheat, as if he were the butt of a divine joke. In the face of weather he cannot control, he sets out to control what he can by designing an irrigation system, enterprise and hope being the mainstays of farming. The next spring brings with it renewed desire, spring, after all, always being the next year in next-year country, as the narrator says: "farmers, impatient as though it was the only spring left in the world to them, burning with the hope that this one would not be another dry year" (115). Sean irrigates his garden and rhapsodizes over the beauty of his green kingdom, his normally

booming voice becoming “gentle” as he “practically crooned” about his “carrots liftin’ their feathery heads” and the melons that will “grow prettier than all the scarlet-coated cardinals at Rome” (130). Sean’s quaint use of personification and metaphor does not diminish the effect of his poetic soul, as he imagines the result of his own intelligence and perseverance brought to bear on the land.

Sean’s attempts to get financing from the bank for a larger irrigation project are dismissed as impractical, because Mr. Abercrombie, the banker, believes that “farmers are not a thrifty lot” (52). Even so, Sean continues to dream about damming the river to irrigate the whole area, so that his green vision can become a wider reality. With the fervour of a preacher, he tries to convince the rest of the community. When Bent Candy doggedly claims that he is not interested, Sean exhorts:

You gotta be! We all gotta be! Just because you bin lucky, you ain’t always gonna be! Look at the garden I had -- that wasn’t luck -- irrigation did it! An’ if we got the whole district -- if we did something -- all of us -- to help ourselves, mebbe we could git help! Irrigate fer wheat an’ oats an’ barley -- irrigate the whole goddam works! (232)

Sean’s preaching--his penchant for declaratives and imperatives, announcing his own fervor and exhorting others to follow his example--is not unlike that of another of the novel’s evangelists.

Saint Sammy is another farmer, whose story Sean brings to the O'Connal house. Sammy too is a liminal figure, but unlike Sean in some ways, for Sean stands astride the boundary between hick and impassioned farmer, whereas Sammy stands astride his past and his delusional present. His tirades have a lot of the same zeal as Sean's, but they do not show as much sense. Sammy, the self-styled prophet, is only slightly more believable than Sean's County Down man. What saves Sean from Sammy's kind of insanity is the realization, on a small scale, of Sean's green vision. As Sean himself says: "If it weren't for me garden, I'd be moving in next door to poor old Saint Sammy" (131). Housed in a piano box, symbolic of an artistic vision of prairie perhaps, Saint Sammy lives with his precious unbroken Clydesdales and his Holsteins in an escape from his previous farm failures. As Sean says, "Years a gittin' rusted out an' cut-wormed out an' hopped out an' hailed out an' droughted out an' rusted out an' smutted out, he up an' got good an' goddam tired out. Crazier'n a cut calf" (131). Despite Sean's alliterative and colorful summation of Sammy's insanity, he puts Sammy's craziness into a clear agrarian context, making his strangeness seem somewhat less odd.

While Sean's green vision is in the here-and-now, encompassing his own farm and the surrounding area, Sammy's is more obviously textual in its rendition of Genesis. But to understand Sammy's diatribes about the garden, it is necessary to introduce the third agrarian threshold

figure. Bent Candy, a man whose very name implies some kind of twisted innocence, is a “profaner of almost a township of flat loam” (232). Candy’s farm has been inexplicably successful, even in the Depression, prospering through a combination of the farmer’s greed, opportunism, and plain luck. He is an early version of the spirit of agribusiness, the kind of farmer who most irks Sean, farming solely with his head and not his heart:

Candy had prospered during the dry years, spreading his crops over land wherever discouraged farmers had left; as he put in acre after acre of wheat, his overhead was low; he could show a profit on only ten bushels return to the acre. He had been lucky too; if rain fell, it fell on Candy’s land; hail had stripped down both sides and around his crops but never on them. (132)

Sean’s thoughts describe Bent Candy as a scheming and unscrupulous entrepreneur, but his tirade on Bent Candy’s warped character and lack of vision, in which he sounds more like Saint Sammy, is perhaps more striking and emphatic: “Goddam the hot bitch Goddess a profit ye worship whilst ye ride yer jigglin’ little black tractor over the land, jigglin’ yer little black soul for the rest of yer grasping’, little, black days” (233). Bent Candy, as Sean so ably points out, is notably the only farmer in the area who uses tractors instead of horses to farm, the “machine in the garden” marking him as a villain of Steinbeckian

flavor. Sean's description of both Candy's tractor and soul as "little" and "black" suggest that there is little to choose between them, that Candy's soul is an automated contraption without feeling. In Sean's discourse, Candy is the devil, but comically reduced to a cartoon version, who spends his days jiggling his little black soul over his fields.

The conflict comes to a head when, in an avaricious frenzy, Candy, in full effervescence of his "black soul," buys out Magnus Petersen's land where Sammy lives with his coveted Clydes, so that he can threaten Sammy with eviction if he will not sell his horses. But divine retribution arrives on Sammy's "perfect smiting day" (287), and winds come, as if in answer to Sammy's prophetic curse upon his neighbor, to topple Bent Candy's shiny red barn.

Like Luke Taylor in "The Runaway," Bent Candy has warped himself through a symbol of wealth, vanity and sheer obsession--the barn, in which he takes such satisfaction:

It was a new barn, hip-roofed and painted red, a thing of beauty and pride. One looked at the flawless, red siding and felt as a child must feel in gazing upon a new, red wagon. The metal runner and pulleys on the broad door were hardly rusted yet, since Candy had built the barn only that spring. It was the barn that was to become the home of Saint Sammy's Clydes, a barn built by a man who did his farming by tractor, and who, although he had no use for

horses, had been obsessed for years by a desire to possess Sammy's. (289)

Candy's desire for the horses stands apart from any practical consideration, which suggests that he is both a man to be appreciated, one with an aesthetic attraction for these animals, and a man to be deplored, one who clearly considers the horses as objects that will improve his esteem, not unlike the barn that he builds to house them.

The barn, when it is an impossibly large and colorful edifice, is often the glorious symbol of success in farm literature, the color and the state of the roof featuring in several descriptions. This fragment of Isabella Valancy Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie" is typical in its account of buildings that symbolize characters' driving ambition and relentless acquisitiveness: "those misty, peak roofed barns-- / Leviathans rising from red seas of grain-- / Are full of ingots shaped like grains of wheat" (195). Like a large red treasure chest, the barn is often the first valuable building that is constructed on a new farm. Consider Grove's *Fruits of the Earth*, in which Abe builds a "huge, red, curb-roofed barn" (35) while Ruth, his wife, raises four children in a house, that to her chagrin, is no better than the hired man's. Abe, assuring her that this state is provisional, argues that the barn, being the main site of commerce and industry, must come first. In *Who*, Candy's barn, however, carries with it slightly different values. Compared to a child's red wagon, it is a comment on Candy's childish and greedy need

to acquire the horses for the correspondingly shiny new building that will show them off to best advantage. Mitchell sets Candy's acquisitive "childishness" apart from other examples of more positive childlikeness--Brian, the Young Ben, and even Saint Sammy.

But Candy is not entirely the empty, flat villain of the novel. Bent he may be, but he is not broken. Even Sean grudgingly remarks about Candy's obsession: "guess it's the only good thing you can say for him -- fussy about horses" (132). Still, it seems only right when, faced with Candy's blackmail, Sammy unleashes his flamboyant tirade on Candy, who, although he appears stoic and unaffected, is secretly moved by the intensity of Sammy's words: "Mr. Candy reached behind himself and knocked with his knuckles against the manure fork handle leaning against his new barn. He was a religious man, and years of prairie farming had deepened in him faith in a fate as effective as that of Greek drama" (290). Mitchell thereby offers a touch of comical foreshadowing of Candy's fate, but more importantly, reveals the threshold that Candy stands astride, with divinity on one side and farming on the other. Even though Candy is the Deacon of the Baptist Church, the narrator has to remind us, in a lovely moment of irony, that somewhere in his "little black soul," he is, in fact, a religious man with a faith that is specifically driven by his experience as a farmer. In the end the barn is razed as if it "had been put through a threshing machine and exhaled through the blower" (294). Candy is left to

intone reluctantly "Amen" in recognition of Sammy's prophesy that now the prairie will be bountiful (Peterman 103) after this "harvest" of Candy's barn.

Brian is drawn into the whirlwind of Sammy's discourse as he is drawn into Sammy's "divine" wind. Sean's tales of Saint Sammy lure Brian, Ike, and Fat out to the prairie where they hear Sammy's rendition of Genesis, in which God creates Adam, the first farmer:

An' He got to thinkin', there ain't nobody fer to till this here soil, to one-way her, to drill her, nor to stook the crops, an' pitch the bundles, an' thrash her, when she's ripe fer thrashin', so He took Him some top soil -- made her into the shape of a man -- breathed down into the nose with the breath of life.

That was Adam. He was a man.

He set him down ontuh a section to the east in the districk a Eden -- good land -- lotsa water. (218-219)

As Sammy orates, the wind, "steadily sibilant," "washed though the dry grasses" (219), forming a soundtrack for the story of agriculture's beginning. Sammy describes his Eden, not as a static scene that comes from a book, but laden with local flavor, as a process of a person working the land in very concrete and colorful ways: drilling, stooking, pitching, and threshing. In this way, the garden becomes a version of the farm.

Walking home, Brian considers Saint Sammy and the feeling that his harangues create. Like Candy, Brian has been affected by the passion of Sammy's language, even if the content of it has been a little obscure. On one hand, Brian dismisses Sammy, remembering Sean's remark that Sammy is "crazy as a cut calf." Brian reckons that his feeling "couldn't come closer through a crazy man gone crazy from the prairie" (220). On the other hand, Brian has to admit that "he had been carried away by the fervour of his words" to such a point that he, himself, "had been alive as he had never been before, passionate for the thing that slipped through the grasp of his understanding and eluded him" (220). Sammy's vision that links humanity with the land has inspired in Brian his feeling. The hyperbolic world that Sammy represents is strange and yet suggestive of something that Brian is looking for, an answer, a faith, a surety, something to shout to the sky. And yet, Sammy's terms are not totally outlandish. The image of Adam made by God out of top soil is not such a strange creation for a prairie boy who has seen his share of dirt devils.

The last agrarian figure is the Ben, the wastrel farmer who exists on the outer edge of society, doing what little he has to do in order to keep himself supplied with tobacco and alcohol (and grain to keep his still active). When Digby visits the Bens to talk about the Young Ben's truancy, he remarks on the ten head of cattle and the "unbelievable piles of manure steaming in the fall sun" (94). It is probably more

precise to call Mrs. Ben the farmer since, it would seem, she does all the work. The Ben argues that his rheumatism precludes him from exertion, as he saunters around town with a fifty-pound sack of chicken feed on his head. A figure on the cusp between the comic and the disturbing, he is first described as a

grey bird of a man, surrounded always by the sour-sweet aroma of brew tanged with a gallop of manure and spiced with natural leaf tobacco. The Ben had about as much moral conscience as the prairie wind that lifted over the edge of the prairie world to sing mortality to every living thing. (32-33)

Despite the Ben's comic side, the connection between amorality and mortality underlines his sinister nature. For Brian, the Ben, like Saint Sammy, elicits confusing feelings of something ultimately unknowable. When Brian sees the Ben in prison, he "felt that he was seeing more than was actually before him" (283).

Some critics are inclined to dismiss the comedy of the farmer figures like Saint Sammy and the Ben as being examples only of good, finely-drawn humor, but serving no serious purpose. Other critics, like Ken Mitchell, go to some length to assure us of the opposite, that Sammy, for example, is a "visionary madman" ("Universality" 37), "a man who *has* seen the wind, and who has come to his vision through suffering and humility" (39). Both viewpoints seem to fall short. For

one thing, there is no need to be dismissive of comedy. But neither does it seem right to insist that Sammy is a pure visionary, as if the wind he calls down on Bent Candy's barn *is* actually divine. Harrison, it seems to me, strikes the right balance when he discusses the humor of figures like Sammy and the Ben:

The hyperbolic or slapstick quality of their humour expresses what would now be called the "carnival" impulse of comedy, the spirit that seeks a temporary suspension of the normal rules of society to unleash the anarchic forces of natural vitality. The resultant disorder is not intended as an alternative to the old, corrupt order any more than Saint Sammy's theology or the Ben's moonshining are meant to be examples for Brian; it is merely a release that enfranchises the spirit to seek its own way, to risk the dangers of change that can lead to renewal. (*Intimations* 54-55)

Like the wind itself, Sammy and the Ben are elemental forces that can blow haphazardly. Seeing them as symbols of "release" allows them their spirited characters without requiring them to serve as moral exempla.

The comedy of the farm is most clearly seen at Uncle Sean's. When Brian goes to the farm to stay with Sean while his father is in the hospital, he is for the first time immersed in the farm in a way he

has not been before while simply visiting. At first he finds it a quirky place, a place where Sean, for example, never talks to Ab directly but instead addresses objects around him. Brian also finds the farm a chilling place, where animals like the runty pig are routinely killed because they will not thrive. Like the tortured gopher, the drowned rabbits, and the the two-headed calf, the runty pig sparks questions in Brian about the precariousness of life on the prairie, and his role in that tenuousness. By throwing a fit, he forces Sean and Ab into letting him take care of the pig, only later to look at it and realize that it would always be “a shivery runt” (250).

The farm episode is an interesting interlude in the novel, one that critics often set aside. Ricou says rather cryptically that it is on his uncle’s farm that Brian discovers “‘country,’ the endearing weakness of the cook, Annie, and the hidden gentleness of the severe evangelist, Ab” (“Notes” 13). I am not sure what he means by “country” or what “country” has, by definition, to do with weak cooks or gentle evangelists. Ricou does highlight, however, something curious about the characters of Ab and Annie. In a different reading, Harrison argues that the farm section of the novel functions in the same way as forest interludes did in pastoral comedy, when the main characters from the court would escape to the forest in order to learn something from the rustic characters before they returned to the court to apply the lesson (53-54). This pastoral interlude in *Who* is also suggested by

Northrop Frye's identification of a pastoral myth in Canadian writing that is linked "with some earlier social condition -- pioneer life, the small town, the *habitant* rooted to his land" (*Bush* 238-239). Ab and Annie are definitely "rustics" in a way that Sean, with his more fleshed-out character, and his access to the town through Brian's family, is not. Harrison makes several good points about the farm setting:

At the farm Brian encounters a miniature community comically threatened by the repressive force of Ab's born-again religion and blocked by obstacles to a marriage of Ab and Annie. The reduced stature of this society is apparent not simply in Ab's limp and Annie's illiteracy and eye problem but from the fact that Brian can deal with the adults virtually as equals. (53)

Brian here can relate to the farm characters in more dynamic ways than he could with his family at home in the town, and discover new possibilities of himself on the farm. He can experiment with Sean's "powerful" language to champion what he sees as his moral stance with regards to the pig (as his uncle does with farming). He can also actively manipulate the conditions of Annie and Ab's domestic union, complicated though he finds them to be. At the farm, Brian gets to try out the more complex social roles of adulthood in a relatively safe setting.

But Brian's experience of the farm is not altogether straightforward, since some of these roles fit less well than others. As Brian gets more accustomed to the farm, he begins to notice different things: "Country was much stiller than town was; the clear fall afternoons lay over the farmyard like something measured out; the sounds could not have been more distinct if they had been dropped down a deep well" (251). But instead of this clarity prompting the "feeling," it only drives Brian to irritation that there is "nothing to do"--prairie as vacuum.

Duke and Empress, hitched to the rack, standing in the farmyard, royally and grandly named, might seem to offer a promise of distraction. Brian has recognized earlier, when visiting the livery barn, that horses "were able to give him 'the feeling' almost every time" (195), and so he is confident that driving the team will just be a natural extension of his new identity on the farm. The predictable event occurs, as Brian's little jaunt around the farmyard becomes a wild looping ride. Brian is finally thrown off and the old hay wagon breaks apart until it becomes a "two-wheeled chariot drawn by horses with manes flying" (255). The whole contraption careens wildly out of the yard, with Abe madly grasshoppering after it.

After the dust settles and Ab regains control, Brian, awash in "delicious self-pity" (256), decides to walk home, to town, where he feels he belongs, and leave the now alien farm where runty pigs are

killed, and no one appreciates him anyway. As he walks, he sees in the distance a man stooking, the image of the farmer's predictable and routine movements seeming to Brian "carefully silly" (257). Brian transfers his own foolishness in driving the horses on to the whole agrarian world which becomes laughable, so pointless and barren that it is ridiculous as well. Brian's anger fades quickly as he finds himself suspended physically between town and farm, feeling seriously out of place. In this liminal moment, Brian enters into a "vertical man/horizontal world" configuration:

A meadow lark sang, and the prairie was a suddenly vaster place.

There must be lots of miles left for him to go yet, he thought, for he could see no sign of the town. He was alone, as utterly alone as it is possible to be only upon a prairie. (258)

In response to the "frightening emptiness and grandeur outside" (258), Brian crawls psychologically inward, when he burrows physically into a haystack. Like Will, in "Not By Rain Alone," who digs his way into the haystack to avoid the weather, Brian seeks to avoid the storm of his own thoughts:

He was filled now with a feeling of nakedness and vulnerability that terrified him. As the wind mounted in intensity so too the feeling of defenselessness rose in him.

It was as though he listened to the dreaming wind and in the spread darkness of the prairie night was being drained of his very self. He was trying to hold together something within himself, that the wind demanded and was relentlessly leeching from him. (259)

Mitchell foreshadows the coming news of his father's death with this moment of suspended anxiety. But Brian's near loss of self is not what marks the end of this section; rather, Brian crawls out of the stack in the grey dawn, into a world "transfigured with the thin morning light" (259), and rediscovers himself in a fiercely visceral way:

he was hungry with a raging hunger that took his mind from the chillness of the dawning morning and would not let him be conscious of any other thing. His stomach was a live thing that he had not known to be in him before, eager with a fierceness that could not be denied, greedy as a calf nudging at its mother's bag, anxious as pigs running to a trough, standing in their food and sloshing it while it dripped from the sides of their jaws, impatient as a horse pawing at the floor of its stall. He knew now that he had never been truly hungry in his life before. (260)

The insistent agrarian similes that Brian conjures to imagine the acuteness of his hunger realign his relationship to the farm. Reborn

out of the haystack, configured now as akin to horse and pig, he finds that now-rare “feeling” washing over him as he begins to walk into the rising sun. And almost immediately he knows where he is, the formless void of the previous night evaporating. Brian finds his point of reference for the town, the “sloping shoulders of the town’s grain elevators” (260), his landmark a convenient and reassuring symbol that joins the town and farm.

After his father’s death, Brian returns to the prairie. Worried by what he feels is his lack of emotion, he is struck by the inadequacy of any expression to represent the loss of his father. Surrounded by the repeated and stilted refrain of the community that his father was “a fine man,” Brian walks “out into the prairie’s stillness and loneliness that seemed to flow around him, to meet itself behind him, ringing him and separating him from the town” (268). The animation of the wind and its intimacy with Brian highlight the scene. A complex symbol, the wind is more than a source of benign solace. For instance, the landscape into which he wanders after his father’s death is not one of comfort, particularly, but of an active space that meets him, expecting him to be there. There he finds in the limitless prairie with its “forever” cycles of days and seasons a representation of his father’s mortality that connects him to the land at the same time as its human absence connects him back to his family, the thought of his mother’s grief finally triggering his own. Mitchell’s passage is nicely

ambiguous because the prairie that Brian looks upon does not itself always offer respite.

On the other hand, Brian's grief does not deepen "into psychic damage that can never heal" (113), as R. Alexander Kizuk rather melodramatically claims. It would be more satisfactory to say that the prairie gives Brian the ability to see humanity which, along with the seasons and days, exists "forever" too, in a generalized sense ("People were forever born; people forever died"), and his father who is "never" in a specific sense (For Brian's father -- never"). This prospect allows him a representation of death that does not sentimentalize his loss nor numb him to it, but simply allows it to exist as a part of a larger canvas.

In the end, Brian's future would seem to take him both to the town (his mother hopes to send him to university) and to the farm where he wants to become a "dirt doctor" (324). Having taken to heart Sean's rantings that the prairie is sick, and that such illness can be cured by the development of new crop varieties, the prevention of soil drifting, and irrigation, Brian is offered a way of finding a niche that may span the gap between town and farm. As Ken Mitchell says, "he is determined to apply the formal 'intellectual' education he acquires through Digby to the love of land he associates with his Uncle Sean, Saint Sammy and the Young Ben" ("Universality" 40). To say that Brian is "determined" may be overstating the case since the plans for

his future are offered to us only obliquely, as second-hand information, through a short conversation between Maggie and Sean (324). Indeed, Mitchell may have included Brian's future direction as an afterthought because of his editor, Weeks', insistence that the novel should end with the path of the "hero" well marked out (B. Mitchell 12).

The final images of the novel also suggest what a tenuous niche dirt doctoring might be, and how large the thresholds. In Brian's final visit to the prairie, the town grows indistinct: "grey and low upon the horizon, it lay, not real, swathed in bodiless mist -- quite sunless in the rest of the dazzling prairie" (327). As in the beginning of the novel, Mitchell's focus turns here, at the end, to the prairie. Brian sees a long line of telephone wires and imagines each support as a person, connected to the next by the "rime-white wires," each "person" getting smaller and less distinct as the whole structure stretches to the horizon, but connected nevertheless as each "stretched back a long line" (327). Here vertical man is "stuck up," like a child's paper cut-out, exposed in an impossibly horizontal world. But implicit also in this image are the connections Brian makes among the "people" tied together through the telephone wires, "barely perceptible in the stillness, hardly a sound heard so much as a pulsing of power felt" (327). The telephone lines are quite literally vehicles of human connection between otherwise isolated inhabitants of the prairie. The "pulsing of power" that Brian detects in them is subtle, but a critical

sign of community. Brian may not “know” all the answers at the end, but he is still young enough to believe that they exist, and he is left feeling the power of the possibilities.

In the last passage, the narration significantly moves away from Brian’s point of view, pulls back like a camera from the scene in reversal of the novel’s beginning:

A year is done.

Another comes and it is done.

Where spindling poplars lift their dusty leaves and wild sunflowers stare, the gravestones stand among the prairie grasses. Over them a rapt and endless silence lies. This soil is rich.

Here to the West a small dog’s skeleton lies, its rib bones clutching emptiness. Crawling in and out of the jaw-bone’s teeth an ant casts about; it disappears into an eye-socket, reappears to begin a long pilgrimage down the backbone spools.

The wind turns in silent frenzy upon itself, whirling into a smoking funnel, breathing up top soil and tumbleweed skeletons to carry them on its spinning way over the prairie, out and out to the far line of the sky. (328-331)

Here too are the “skeleton requirements” from the beginning of the novel, the skeleton of a dog and tumbleweeds, as well as the

combination of the local and the cosmic. Symbols of death dance with symbols of regeneration in these final paragraphs, suggesting a richly ambiguous closure. The gravestones seem intimately linked to the rich soil, the ant's life connected to the death of the dog, the wind breathing in the earth and spinning everything out and away in ever-widening circles. The close of the novel is cinematic as the focus moves from the minutiae of the prairie, the soil and insects, and then pans out to the immense space, "out and out," until it meets the sky.

This closing has been the subject of much debate right from the beginning when Weeks wanted it omitted. Susan Gingell-Beckmann highlights the lyricism of the ending by rewriting the final passage as verse to emphasize the melodic effects. Barbara Mitchell echoes this musical analogy when she describes Weeks' deletions as having "the effect of transposing this symphonic novel into an essentially major key" (18). In this same vein, one of the more interesting comments about the ending comes from Sherrill Grace who, wishing for more open-endedness, argues that the narrator

silences all the more disturbing, contradictory, and ambivalent impulses of the discourse; he stabilizes the potentially de-centred narrative, finalizes the character of his hero, and in the place of an authentic, ongoing dialogue about the important social, racial, moral, and philosophical issues raised by the voices in the text, he withdraws behind

an impersonal voice that rejects fruitful ambiguity, in favor of a kind of transcendental unitary perspective. What might have been an ideologically open argument becomes a deeply--and, for me, disturbingly--conservative attempt to depoliticize the text. (126)

In her article, Grace praises *Who* for its multiplicity of voices, only to find the ending depressingly monologic. Mitchell, I would argue, does employ a fairly authoritative (perhaps even "transcendental") voice as he switches to present tense, but to say that it finalizes Brian's character, or that it silences other voices, or that it rejects ambiguity seems a willful misreading.

Let us consider it in some detail. The final passage opens with the announcement of liminality: "The day grays, its light withdrawing from the winter sky till just the prairie's edge is luminous" (328). The first voice that is heard is a dog barking; the second is another dog answering the first. A coyote then joins in and a train that "whoops to the night" rounds out the first paragraph. The town's "hiving sound is there with now and then some sound distinct and separate in the night, a shout, a woman's laugh. Clear -- truant sound" (328). The whole passage is alive with voices: human, animal, mournful, triumphant, busy, lonely. What we have just seen, earlier--the graveyard with its rich soil, the skeletons with crawling insects, the play of Northern Lights--all seem richly ambiguous, a canvas that can represent a whole

range of nuances simultaneously, as Brian has discovered after his father's death. The "truant" sound should alert us to the unexpectedness of other voices, the odd, the unlawful, like the Bens' and Saint Sammy's. I find myself in agreement with Robin Mathews who says: *Who* "recognizes the forces of primal energy always lurking just beneath the surface and just out of sight. But it holds up against those forces a view of human goodness that is neither naive nor pretentious, that neither denies primal energy nor believes in its divinity" (109).

In the novel, the agricultural myth is presented as a rich and often contradictory entity. For example, the farmers are not just virtuous and hard-working like Sean, but also hypocritical and mad like Bent Candy and Saint Sammy. Interestingly, Mitchell also breaks down that polarity between town and country that is one feature of Inge's proposed agricultural myth. This is not to say that the agricultural myth does not exist in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, only that Mitchell has allowed it to evolve to better reflect his historical setting and his own artistic ambitions. In the end, Mitchell has achieved a seriously comic novel that is as richly textured as Ross's short fiction, the primal energy of both coming in part from the possibilities that play at the prairie threshold.

Notes

¹ This sentiment, as it turns out, is not an uncommon one among prairie people. Consider Wallace Stegner's articulation of the litmus years from *Wolf Willow*:

I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people and humor I respond to [. . .] the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it [. . .] The colors and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure [. . .] have been in good part scored into me by that little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead. (23)

Chapter 3

The Blooming "Seed Catalogue" and Other Poems

Robert Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue" is a "landmark" poem in prairie writing, metaphorically and literally. It was one of the first long poems to relate the artistic impulse to the specifics of place on the Canadian prairie. Kroetsch's relationship with place has always been an evocative one. As he asks in *The Crow Journals*: "Is not landscape an event as well as a setting? The place of mythology, of story, become action" (56). Kroetsch sees landscape not as a static place, but as a process, through which a rich reciprocity can blossom, such that a writer can represent prairie through language, at the same time as he can represent language through prairie. As a result, the threshold becomes particularly important, not only because it is situated between agricultural sites of the kind that I have explored in Ross and Mitchell, but also because it opens up sometimes inexplicably in language.

Before I turn to "Seed Catalogue," it would be instructive briefly to consider some other agrarian prairie poems as a background. One of the earliest and most well-known poems about farming is Anne Marriott's "The Wind Our Enemy," a ten-part depiction of the tragedy of the Depression, as seen through the eyes of the poet who was visiting a farm near Forgan, Saskatchewan, during the summer of

1937 (Lenoski 108). Part one bears out the poem's title by beginning with a vigorous personification of the wind, hammering the reader with the sheer malevolence of moving air: "flattening," "knifing," "surging," "darting," "snatching," "whipping," until finally the wind is "soiling the water pail, and in grim prophecy / greying the hair" (1).

The people's passivity is underscored in contrast to the terrible activity of the wind. The wind and soil, now a single entity, colors the prairie in various hues of tan and gray. Before the drought, the world is a much different place, a time when the farmer can easily turn the hope and promise of the field into tangible results:

A man's heart could love his land,
Smoothly self-yielding
Its broad spread promising all his granaries might hold.
A woman's eyes could kiss the soil
From her kitchen window,
Turning its black depths to unchipped cups--a silk crepe
dress--

(Two-ninety-eight, Sale Catalogue) (2)

The soil is an image of bounty that not only grows wheat, but cups and dresses, and indeed, catalogues, the ultimate symbol of material plenty, a two-dimensional book of objects just waiting to become three-dimensional, yours for the ordering. But the wheat that "was embroidering / [. . .] Frail threads needled by sunshine like thin gold"

(2) is quickly dulled by the dejection of the "heavy scraping footsteps" (2) of the farmer and the slow piercing realization of exactly what it means to live in next-year country.

As the Depression intensifies, the soil becomes an image of imprisonment and isolation for prairie people:

Presently the dark dust seemed to build a wall
 That cut them off from east and west and north,
 Kindness and honesty, things they used to know,
 Seemed blown away and lost
 In frantic soil. (6)

The soil gives and takes away in a world that has seemingly lost more than its ability to grow a crop. Marriott uses resonant images of soil and earth throughout the poem, especially to mark the boundary between earth and sky: "The sun goes down. Earth like a thick black coin / Leans its round rim against the yellowed sky" (7). The land is imagined as a kind of currency that exerts ever greater pressure until even the beauty of the sunset is a constant reminder of the loss that is present at the threshold. But that margin is flexible in its meaning. Later when Marriott wants to show the stalwart prairie spirit of two people who hope despite the odds, she paints them "against the yellow sky, a part / Of the jetty silhouette of barn and house" (7). The alignment of the farmers with the familiar agrarian sites of house and barn is a symbol of endurance, however tenuous.

Similarly, in Barry McKinnon's "I Wanted To Say Something," the poem announces the danger of the threshold with his grandparents' arrival in this "new" world:

Someone promised land or gold (similar
 obsessions that somewhere
 you could be free thus the migration of F.C.
 Dalton and wife Jessie arriving

to the edge, this
 land (Part 1)

The edge is simultaneously the edge of the earth and the edge of the paper. The danger of moving towards the precipice is not just the pioneers', but also the writer's. McKinnon, the poet, is interested in how he can "say something" about their distant and different lives relative to his own. He is left a legacy of photographs, some of which he includes in his poem, and tries to find a way as a poet to work that legacy, just as his grandparents worked the land as farmers: "the land: the farmers blood erased (someone made business men / of them all. age consumes them and only gentle chronicles remain / to pass down. the photos" (Part 1). The farmer's relationship with land has eroded to the point that it only lives as faded mementoes.

The poem is divided into two parts. The first is called "The Legacy" in which McKinnon tells the story of his grandparents who lived in a

granary for the first winter because, arriving in October 1908, they did not have enough time to build a house. The twenty-year-old farmer, in an effort to soften this experience for his "new wife," warms her shoes for her in the morning by putting them in the stove: "good thing she had a / nother pair, burnt them one / morning (toes all curled / up" (Part 1). Indeed, turning up one's toes in such an environment is not unusual. In fact, the poem echoes with the word "innocence" to describe the settlers' fundamental ignorance as they scraped at the earth

with a purpose

inside the geometry of how a man conceives

the land, all

without art or grace

and all mediation lacking

clarity (Part 1)

Again, farming is not idealized; there is no "art" or "grace" involved. The farmer, instead, is trapped inside a box of his own imagining, where he creates the land in his mind.

In Part 2, "The Moving Photograph," the poet tries to come to terms with the end of innocence, the inevitable downfall and decay of the idea of the promised land, the realization that crops fail and children die. The moving photograph of the title is two-fold. Like

language, the pictures are not static, and uphold numerous interpretations. But the moving photograph is also the poignant representation of desire, and is what the poet tries to recreate through language, not, this time, out of innocence but out of knowledge. And yet, because knowledge is not a simple thing, the poet struggles with what alternative he can present:

I wanted to say something
 is wrong and provide an
 alternative--to reclaim the spirit
 from the dust, and allow the sun
 to appear clearly on the horizon: to say
 the animals are always holy--to rearrange
 the fields in natural

ecstasy (Part 2)

But the speech act and the writing act are no less hazardous than the farming act. All are hard work and leaps of faith. In the end, the poet chooses to sing "for the land / to return with its gifts / of simplicity, sing for its strength" and to sing "here / where we reach / the edge of the moving photo / graph" (Part 2). McKinnon manages to link himself as a poet to the land in an image of fluidity. Further, by breaking up "photo / graph," he can bring together the work of his ancestors as represented in their pictures, and his need to graph, or write, them all.

A similar urge can be seen in two of Dennis Cooley's poems in *Sunfall*, "every year my dad drew lines" and "every spring my mother poked spring." The poems are elegies to the poet's parents, at the same time as they are complex celebrations of their links with the agrarian world, in both comic and poignant ways. In "every year my dad drew lines," the father is imagined from the point of view of a child, as he drives up and down his fields, making lines, not seeding or cultivating, but just drawing lines, "lots & lots of them" (145), like the lines on a blackboard. But the viewpoint is also of the grown poet, who imagines his father writing his crops, his flax and wheat and barley, writing "his hand over the face of the earth" (145), the power of his inscription suggested by this borrowing from *Genesis*. In good years, when crop and farmer "carried on / some kind of correspondence" (146), the "sun rhymed / seeds green with june then / blond as august" (145). The "seeds brought out the author" (145) in the father, but the inevitable disappointment of the agrarian world means that this writing is in jeopardy: "most years the seeds fell silent [. . .] when they stopped talking altogether / we moved into town it gets lonely / talking to yourself" (146). The conceit of the farmer as lover writing letters to plants, "Dear John" scribbled while on the John Deere, takes some of the sting away from the failure, but the poignancy of that loss is like a palimpsest under the humor:

god knows

he yearned for a word from them
 any word wondered had his letters
 never got through was it the wrong
 address had the earth moved left
 no forwarding address every spring
 my dad wrote them in a fever
 he was in love these were love
 letters he wrote every spring had they
 left him for another couldn't they give him a call
 my father grew more & more hurt they didn't answer
 (146)

In a companion piece, "every spring my mother poked spring," the poet imagines his mother amidst the riotous chaos of her garden, "the whole yard a squabble of vegetables" (147) that she writes, "her finger [. . .] a pencil / she wet & rubbed seeds off" (147). The mother's connection with this agrarian world is intimate, as meaningful and textual as the father's relationship with his crops: "these intricate and literate vegetables were talking / with my mom she'd read at night at the table / file away in the fall in glass jars" (147). Canning becomes another version of literature here, the sealer rings becoming "rings / & rings of memories" as the seeds await the farmer even in winter. The poem ends with the "seeds shining, thinking of mother" (147), the agrarian promise linking person and land in a warm,

expectant way, another season of “poking” ahead. The garden is a richer, more successful version of the father’s field, perhaps because of the richness of the garden in literature, its writerly self a stimulating reminder of the borders in both agriculture and literature.

Kroetsch has long been interested in landscape as border. In an interview with Russell Brown, before the writing of *Seed Catalogue*, Kroetsch describes Canada itself as a “peculiar kind of border land” where “things are really happening” (14), and more specifically, prairie landscape as a place in which threshold becomes particularly meaningful:

the kind of undefined vastness of it with points of reference within that vastness--like a house, for instance, or a river. The western landscape is one without boundaries quite often. So you have the experience within a kind of chaos, yet you have to order it somehow to survive. I’m particularly interested in the kinds of orderings we do on that landscape. (2)

In “Seed Catalogue,” Kroetsch chooses to order his poem using time and place rather than a single, overriding narrative. The prairie landscape with its seeming lack of boundaries becomes an evocative metaphor for literary creation. Ann Munton writes illuminatingly, “The examination of landscape is equally the discovery of literary form” for

Kroetsch ("Horizons" 85). This margin in landscape suggests many other tensions in Kroetsch's poem, such as the play between the "high brow" and the colloquial, and the written and the oral.

Dick Harrison has suggested that the first generation of writers who could claim ancestors on the prairie have had a different perspective with regards to the past. One of the features that these writers face is the passing of the agrarian west. One possible response is a nostalgic remembering; another is a demythologizing. Harrison says this about Kroetsch, one of those prairie-born authors: at "the same time that he is demythologizing the West, he is offering the prairie imagination its local past in usable terms by mythologizing the commonplaces of prairie life" (*Unnamed* 212-213). While Robert Thacker agrees about Kroetsch's mythologizing, he still insists on the great prairie fact as the force that propels even postmodern prairie writers. Thacker believes that the land speaks "louder than the people," that even

the modernist and postmodernist strategies they have attempted to write of the prairie have in no way circumvented the imaginative effects of prairie space. Indeed, Kroetsch's metafictionalized mythologizing is but another way of dealing with the effects of the landscape on the imagination, of what he calls the "chaos" of western space. (224)

Dennis Cooley describes the voicing of Kroetsch's poem as "something close to a documentary muse" (201), which, in turn, invites the vernacular, that allows us to hear discourses in new ways, "to read them / as *other* words" (203). Similarly, Manina Jones asserts that each "textual component of the poem is [. . .] 'grafted' onto the larger body," noting that "the method is also a 'graft' in the sense that the poet illicitly 'plays dirty' with the poetic conventions of both lyric voice and organic form" (115). Kroetsch asks his reader to work hard, to see (or not) disparate connections in this overgrown garden, but to be always alive to possibility.

The poem plays at discovering a sense of place on the prairies through vegetative and literary growth. The actual seed catalogue, upon which Kroetsch draws, and from which he quotes liberally, serves as a source of promise for the coming season, and as a symbol for place-making. That source seems to offer limitless desire, designed to fill up the sterile mid-winter space with imagination:

Into the dark of January
the seed catalogue bloomed

a winter proposition, if
spring should come, then [. . .] (13)

But the First Kroetschean Principle says that nothing in Kroetsch is ever what it seems, at least not that alone. The conditional phrase (if.

. . then. . .) in this passage puts into question not just the role of the blooming seed catalogue but the seasons themselves. Here Kroetsch echoes the declamatory flourish of Shelley's last lines of "Ode to the West Wind" in which he calls out to the wind: "Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (390). Kroetsch plays with Shelley's grandiloquent tone in which he compares the wind to his own rhetoric which will do no less than "awaken" the earth. Shelley's final question, surely rhetorical, gets turned on its head here. On the Canadian prairie, even the seasons can be in doubt. But the fecundity of the seed catalogue, having the same ferocious sense of itself as Shelley's poetry, works hard to banish any doubts; it, after all, comes "with illustrations." The catalogue, always conscious of being a pale symbol of the garden itself, makes up the shortfall with its boosterism, always promising what is bigger and greener and more robust, putting its paper self in the place of its signified.

No wonder that Kroetsch should use such an expressive metaphor for his poetic purposes. After finding a 1917 seed catalogue in the Glenbow Archives, Kroetsch wrote what he calls a translation of that seed catalogue into "Seed Catalogue." He describes the impetus behind that translation:

The seed catalogue is a shared book in our society. We have few literary texts approaching that condition. I

wanted to write a poetic equivalent of the 'speech' of a seed catalogue. The way we read the page and hear its implications. Spring. The plowing, the digging, of the garden. The mapping of the blank, cool earth. The exact placing of the explosive seed. (*Lovely* 8)

The explosive seed, with "its dual potential for upward and downward movement" (Campbell 19), becomes a potent symbol and the book of seeds, as it were, a potent text.

The seed catalogue arrives by train, not unlike the mythical stranger of other Westerns, who comes from afar, the catalogue as character: "It arrived in winter, the seed catalogue, on a January / day. It came into town on the afternoon train" (23). The catalogue is like the swaggering stranger who comes to town with stories to tell. Creating place by imagining the landscape of the garden, the seed catalogue can be forgiven its hyperbolic and melodramatic descriptions because, in its function within Kroetsch's poem, the reader implicitly accepts the catalogue's role as storyteller, or perhaps as travelling salesman, replete with well-varnished narratives. Russell Brown quite rightly suggests that the catalogue descriptions, with their high-flown voices, represent ideologies that must be "decreated" ("Seeds" 159). Pamela Banting goes a little further, focusing on how the juxtaposition of the written discourse of the seed catalogue and other informal speech acts play off each other, the effect of which is an oralizing of

the catalogue ("Translation" 101). The descriptions themselves certainly carry the seeds of their own undoing, but they also function as examples of self-aware discourse that have the courage of their own convictions, so to speak. The catalogue knows its business and isn't afraid to be audacious and tacky, if need be, like a salesman in loud checked trousers and audacious belt and shoes. Consider the opening of the poem, the description of cabbage:

No. 176--Copenhagen Market Cabbage: 'This new introduction, strictly speaking, is in every respect a thoroughbred, a cabbage of highest pedigree, and is creating considerable flurry among professional gardeners all over the world.' (11)

The description attracts and entertains in a thoroughly knowing way. Firstly, this is not just your ordinary garden-variety cabbage; it has an alternate identity, a number like a secret agent, teasing us with the lure of anonymity. But more, it has European connections, sporting Denmark's capital in its name, and flaunts a capitalist vigor, being a "market" cabbage that excites "professional gardeners." The pedantic note in the beginning, "strictly speaking," only serves to make the authoritative voicing of the description even more outrageously funny, as if the catalogue is using admirable restraint in not shouting the qualities of this vegetable from the rooftops. As it is, it conjures up vague notions of cabbage sex, this "thoroughbred,"

of unquestionable "pedigree," this stud of a cabbage. The "new introduction" is a cabbage on the cutting-edge designed to whip "gardeners all over the world" into a consumer frenzy. The discourse is campy and canny--and why not? There is a self-aware language to the tall tale, isn't there, the words a virile and playful westerner might well speak, especially in the depths of winter, tongue in cheek?

Kroetsch chooses the seed catalogue because of its carnivalesque ability to make place; it is at once colorful, expressive, outrageous, serious, comic and hopeful. It locates hope and desire in the physical world; it gives the convincing illusion of presence in a land of convincing absence. The seed catalogue becomes a kind of prophet, like Saint Sammy in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a bit hard to take at times, but enthusiastic in its evangelistic faith, calling to itself a world of continual resurrection.

Consider Kroetsch's cauliflower. Unlike the description of the cabbage from the opening of the poem, the cauliflower is not merely aesthetically or professionally appealing, it is no less than singlehandedly capable of structuring a society on the prairies:

'Cauliflower is unquestionably one of the greatest inheritances of the present generation, particularly Western Canadians. There is no place in the world where better cauliflowers can be grown than right here in the West. The finest specimens we have ever seen,

larger and of better quality, are annually grown here
on our prairies.' (29)

Reminiscent of the promotional literature that lured immigrants to the west with seductive rhetoric about the abundance of nature,¹ the vegetative discourse of the seed catalogue flows with boldface superlatives, resembling, in our more contemporary time, little sound bites from a television commercial. After all, it is selling "place" and not through the allure of a European capital this time, but through the local, "*our prairies*" (italics mine). This cauliflower is an "inheritance" for present generations that can situate the prairies as a place where "perfection" can happen. And this unassuming vegetable can do all that because it is one with the landscape, in a Zen-like union. It does not have to adapt; it already fits, indeed speaks as the very essence of the place, thriving "*to a point of perfection here*" (italics mine). Such associations sell all the comforts of the perfect place where the struggle to survive is not the issue, but where bounteous nature springs unbidden from the earth in a prairie Eden.

The strategy of playing on our hopeful natures, our variable belief that Eden can in fact exist, *should* at least exist, is so seductive that we almost forget the comic proportions of a vegetable that, like a cruciferous mystic, is at one with its surroundings. The dual reading of these descriptions makes them doubly rich. Anyone reading about

cauliflower as an inheritance understands implicitly the silliness of the metaphor, and yet. . . . And yet the rhetoric works because it is encoded within the ironic comedy Kroetsch permits, and because it participates in the narrative of growth and renewal, and of the home place. And so we are pleased to accept it as funny and serious at the same time.

The other catalogue descriptions all have their own stories to tell/sell. The entry for the "Improved Golden Wax Bean," while positing in "moral grandeur" (Thomas 25) that beans are virtuous, also boasts a line in block letters in case we miss the superlative content: "THE MOST PRIZED OF ALL BEANS" (13). Presumably, Jack would have needed more than one cow to get his hands on these. The squash is "matchless" and apparently "heads the list" as a "cooker." We could be forgiven if we hear "hooker" though, as its description is downright sexy: "The fruits are large, olive shaped, of a deep rich green color, the rind is smooth" (19). The speaker, coyly we might suppose, piqued by the very words, immediately asks "But how do you grow a lover?"

Other entries bear similar fruit. The brome grass, of which we read, may have no great beauty or European connections, but it "[f]lourishes under absolute neglect" (35), and is a perennial, a plant that does not need to be seeded every year, but grows unbidden and untended. In the description of the brome grass, we hear this discourse a little differently than the others since it can so well

represent the poet himself. We begin to hear poetry in these entries. Take, for instance, an accompanying testimonial letter to brome grass, written by "Amie." It begins with its own rhetoric of superlatives--"The longest brome grass I remember seeing was [. . .]" (47)--but the effect is lyrical, memorable, as she describes the grass coming up to the horse's hips. So fantastic is the grass that she interrupts her journey to Calgary to enjoy an interlude on a mattress made of this magical giant brome grass.

The poem continually intertwines the comic and the cosmic like so many voluptuous vines, as it does in the refrain that immediately follows the description of the cauliflower: "But how do you grow a poet?" (as if to say 'if only it were that simple'). And perhaps it is. The question is at once serious and comic. It harkens back to the hired man's joke about the boy: "just / about planted the little bugger. / Cover him up and see what grows" (13). Perhaps that *is* how you grow a poet: plant him as a seedling, add lots of manure, and see what happens. The hired man thinks he is being funny, but we know better, our ear is already attuned to metaphors of growth. The poet as boy, in fact, does fall into the garden as the bed is being prepared for planting, a "harrowing" experience, one might say:

This is what happened:

we were harrowing the garden.

You've got to understand this:

I was sitting on the horse.

The horse was standing still.

I fell off. (11)

Here is the authoritative tongue-in-cheek voice again, this time the speaker's, insisting on the veracity of his story ("This is what happened") and courteously but insistently pointing out what the important bits are ("You've got to understand this"). The boy he describes does seem singularly ill-adapted to the physical world of the farm as epitomized by the "standing" joke of the boy falling off a standing horse. At this point, as David Arnason says, the boy's future as a cowboy, the "man on a horse, riding off into the sunset [. . .] the quintessential Western image of the masculine" (79) looks a little bleak.

But the boy may have fallen into clover, so to speak, if he can get over not being a quintessential image. The garden, after all, has its own attractions. Doesn't the mother, while teasing the boy about cleanliness, promise him he could grow cabbages in his ears (no small thing for an imaginative boy)? The garden and the mother are linked again, for the boy and the adult, as the mother whispers her refrain to him, in life and in death, "Bring me the radish seeds" (11, 17). The poet also invokes his mother through a list of vegetables, their quirky and resonant names, "Telephone Peas" and "Garden Gem Carrots" (15), acting as a kind of charm. Similarly, the lyric poemlet about

sweet peas invokes the mother through the "grace / of your tired / hands" (45). In the end, in any case, the poetry found in the garden even has the power to return the poet to his horse, as Al Purdy proves, galloping his Cariboo horse through the threshold space of a revolving restaurant, "the turning center in the still world" (35).

The garden seems to stand in sharp contrast to the male-oriented cash crop of the farm: his father "was puzzled / by any garden that was smaller than a / 1/4-section of wheat and summerfallow" (13). The farm proper (so-called), domain of the hard, practical work-a-day world, is named in the poem as the antithesis to the poetic niche the garden occupies. Peter Thomas comments persuasively on these worlds: "The poem chronicles the contention of these two claims--the closed structures of the agrarian mythos and the flight of shamanistic song," using "the different roles of his mother and father to exemplify this larger conflict" (24). The father legitimizes the desire to make place through agriculture because it is concrete, circumscribed and practical, capable of being pinned down exactly by a geometry of letters and numbers: "N. E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian" (13). Indeed, the prairie is mapped out in these convenient little symmetrical blocks, often heedless of natural topography, as we see in the father's words:

We give form to the land by running
a series of posts and three strands
of barbed wire around a 1/4-section. (31)

Poetry, by more easily accommodating the curve, could be considered a kind of “correction line,” as in the poet’s second try, the reprise an adjustment of sorts, at describing the home place (13). But, predictably, the father’s response to his son’s poetic aspirations, though funny in a wry sort of way, is discouraging and crushingly unimaginative:

First off I want you to take that
crowbar and drive 1,156 holes
in that gumbo.
And the next time you want to
write a poem
we’ll start the haying. (31)

In the face of the quotidian grind of agriculture, poetry seems hopelessly unproductive, a lovely but impractical flower garden. But once again, we soon see, all is not what it might appear. Thomas’s theory of conflict between the mother and the father is complicated by the father’s unusual love affair (and storytelling) in the garden. When the father ventures out to do battle with the badger, his positioning is distinctly cartoonish: “My father took the double-barrelled shotgun out into the potato patch and waited” (16). Like Elmer Fudd stalking Bugs Bunny, the father will never kill the badger, but in the end, it will make a good story, which it does, with the killing of the magpie fifty feet away: “Just call me sure-shot, / my father

added" (17). The father's interest in the badger only begins as adversarial, but soon broadens out into a closer, affectionate relationship, as he delves into dark matters of badger motivation.

But the question still gets asked, "How do you grow a poet?" Perhaps the problem is that Canadian prairie poetry has no text that functions as fully as does the seed catalogue for plants: a collection of elegant yet blustery declaratives that guilelessly insist on the perfection of a particular variety of poetry for the prairies. What the prairie landscape offers instead of the circumlocutions of the seed catalogue is the prairie road, like a furrow in a field, "the shortest distance / between nowhere and nowhere. This road is a poem" (33). This poem has been traversed, albeit unsuccessfully, by the porcupine. The poet himself has only left a trace of his movements, the faintest palimpsest, but one that will at least last until the following winter:

a pile of rabbit
turds that tells us
all spring long
where the track was (33)

So the would-be poet, left largely to his own resources, toys with narrative fragments--"Once upon a time in the village of Heisler"--only to reject them as story. The poet "stammers into silence" (Arnason 90) even as he prepares to invoke a muse that will show him a way into poetry. He comes up with some potential local substitutes:

how about that girl
 you felt up in the
 school barn or that
 girl you necked with
 out by Hastings' slough [. . .] (29)

By inventing different muses, the poet tries to find a way of voicing poetry in a world that is without an established tradition to look at or to fall back on. Gunilla Florby describes the post-colonial nature of that expression for the writer living in the absence of the world's cultural and social models. But she also observes the tension between needing something and dispensing with that need. In "the absence of clay and wattles (whatever the hell they are)" (23), the

writer is giving voice to his regret at not being able to feel part of the culture of the old world while at the same time demonstrating a manly who-the-hell-cares independence, one moment alluding to Yeats's romantic building technique, the next repudiating this kind of academic pseudo-knowledge. (91)

There may be no final solutions, but the crack that has developed on the margin between old world examples and the need to break away and tell our own stories in our own way has left a rich ground of possibility.

The threshold to poetry is enacted in the poem through the house. Arnason has argued that "Seed Catalogue" is all horse, no house, or

rather that there is “no entry” (91) to the house. But there *is* a way into the house, through the garden, if you pay attention to the threshold. Early in the poem, the speaker tries to name the time when the storm windows from the house become frames for a hotbed, house mercurially becoming garden and turning back again: “Then it was spring. Or, no: / then winter was ending” (11). Wanda Campbell notes that the dual-function of the glass is a palimpsest, the storm windows on the house signalling that “spring is discarded but still faintly visible” (20). Similarly, the glass on the hotbed speaks so clearly of its stormwindow-ness that the whole concept of the threshold between the seasons gets exposed. The demarcation between the seasons may seem clear, but the perspective, whether we look back or look forward, is a matter for debate. At the threshold between the seasons, is it the start of spring or is it the end of winter? The poet’s decision that “winter was ending” is repeated again on the first page before he falls off the horse (11), and later after the passage about brome grass: “The end of winter : / seeding / time” (35). The force of the repetition invites us to contemplate this blank page of winter. Winter and not spring is, indeed, the time for the seed catalogue, as it sweeps into town in “the dark of January” (3). But there are winter considerations other than a deferred promise of green.

The speaker invokes the seeming absence of the prairie through winter:

West is a winter place.

The palimpsest of prairie

under the quick erasure

of snow, invites a flight. (45)

The winter prairie becomes the ultimate threshold image, like a sheet of white paper with traces of writing, that invites a kind of flight. Kroetsch further destabilizes the image by casting it in deconstructive terms; like language, the prairie is reassuringly meaningful, but it is also menacing, for its form is mercurial and threatens us with an abyss we cannot see, though we suspect is there. But the fact is, it is not just a piece of white paper: the supposedly undifferentiated prairie, a cliché of the worst order, dear to the hearts of those who have never lived there, is always already marked. As Douglas Reimer says, Kroetsch “dramatically, and intellectually, deconstructs the myth of the sterility of the prairie” (121). No erasure on land is ever complete. The invitation to flight the prairie/paper offers is the palimpsest itself, just as reading the original Turnstone Press version of “Seed Catalogue” is an invitation to peer behind the text at the silk screened pages of McKenzie’s Seed Catalogues where vegetables, tools, and flowers peer back at you. And yet, Arnason reads the final line as a literal invitation to flight: “The traces of a prairie landscape and a prairie culture are put under erasure (*sur rasure*) by the coming

of winter, and the artist is invited to flee the place" (91). But it could just as certainly be a flight of fancy, the kind of impetus that sees people make snow angels in virgin drifts, or try to pee their names in the snow, for that matter, as in Birk Sproxton's *Headframe* (75) they do.

But the invitation is ambiguous, and need not be simply symbolic of creative potential. After all, there are other flights in the poem. Perhaps it was the erasure of prairie that prompted the poet's cousin to enlist in the Second World War, flying to an unknown "adventure" in the "Old Country." An ironic and gruesome inscription on landscape is sketched out when, during the war, the cousin drops his cargo of bombs, and himself, on the city below.

a shell/exploding
in the black sky: a
strange planting

a bomb/exploding
in the earth: a
strange

man/falling
on the city.

Killed him dead.

It was a strange
planting. (43)

The duality of bomb/shell and ground/sky frames this “strange planting” of the Icarus figure whose death is almost comically intensified by the double claim: “Killed him dead.” The poet ponders: “A strange muse: forgetfulness. [. . .] Oh, she was the mothering sort. Blood / on her green thumb” (43). Arnason must skew this violent feminine image as masculine in order to fit the masculine/feminine binary of his argument. But the corruption of the garden is prefigured in the mythical figure of Eve, she who presides over several earlier and influential stories of gardens. The garden in literature always carries with it a trace of the biblical garden, and is therefore often a site of bounteous nature, hope, redemption, and transgression. In this way, the garden as metaphor can happily encompass both perfection and corruption. A reader can run a hand along the twine of this argument through the poem. The mother makes nice straight rows in the garden “with a piece of binder twine, stretched between two pegs” (13), a line so unswerving, and resistant to correction, one might suppose that it is not unlike the father’s posts and barbed wire, and not unlike the poet’s own prairie road. Then, too, the boy and Germaine, bloomers down, play dirty on the paper from the twine gunny sacks in the granary where seed is stored.

Neither the mother, nor the garden, it would seem, can avoid corruption. After all, as "Seed Catalogue" comically concludes, in the voice of a kid's joke, both "Adam *and* Eve got drowned" (21).

Unlike the "Old Country," the prairie at first appears to be simply unwritten space, without conflict or violence. But part of the prairie's memory includes the coulee the poet visits on another winter day where the "Bloods surprised the Crees [. . .] surprised / them to death" (33). Pamela Banting, in the context of Kroetsch's stone hammer poem, usefully describes the similarities between land and text. She says that, like the inscriptions on the stone hammer: "The land--marked by [. . .] the plow, spilled blood, barbed-wire fences [. . .] and the paperwork of numerous land transactions--is similarly textual" (96). The palimpsest of the prairie becomes even more intriguing when we see the history of this aboriginal land, already written, not only under the erasure of winter snow but our own ignorance.

The inscription on land often involves a search for home. Like the seed catalogue, the character, Mary Hauck, comes from Ontario complete with her hope chest. The hope chest is a lot like the seed catalogue, a contained place that holds within it an anticipated future, the seeds of domesticity, the house. This future, however, made up of satin sheets, embroidered pillow cases and English china, burns up along with the Heisler Hotel. As Russell Brown argues, this loss can be liberating at the same time as it is frightening, representative of "a

false past which must be 'uncreated' if we are to find an authentic present" (260).

The authentic present, too, can be a chilly place. Consider the lone farmhouse that appears in "Seed Catalogue." The two descriptions of the stark house at the beginning and end of the poem (almost making their own symmetrical frame) reveal it as circumscribed by weather and isolation.

No trees
around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.
The home place:
a terrible symmetry. (13)

This passage startles with its "poem-ness," a little lyric in the midst of this great meandering prairie meditation. It seems, on the surface, to be filled with negation: there are "no trees," and a list of what *is* there speaks, ironically, only of absence through the incessant pressure of "only." The repeated words and stubby sentences lend the homely image of the house a starkness that it barely needs. The home place, the singular farmhouse standing in the middle of the prairie without even trees to give it a sense of proportion is the epitome of isolation. The image of the house here is different than the

comically-inspired gopher model that characterizes the town with its community of "telephone poles / grain elevators / [and] church steeples" (22).

The farmhouse, by virtue of its singularity, can only be earnest, proclaiming itself the centre of . . . what exactly? There lies the crux of the "terrible symmetry," the last line of the passage heralded by the colon to add a solemn sense of expectancy, the "home place: / a terrible symmetry." The house in this last line has symmetry in all its senses--a beauty of proportion, a sense of harmony, and a terrifying austerity that lends the whole passage a complex poignancy. At the same time, it is as if the house itself is stripped of its signification because it is an unrelieved edifice. But by the end of the poem, the house is at least still standing, no longer the illustration of a "terrible symmetry." When Kroetsch ends with a question, "Who was left?" (47), we as readers are asked to people the house, or find our own way inside, perhaps through the threshold of the storm windows. Like the townspeople who reconstruct the Heisler Hotel after it burns down, you rebuild it bigger and then fill it "full of a lot of A-1 Hard Northern bullshitters" (25), well-bred bullshitters, that is. The alternative to these peopled buildings is the prospect of the parkland dotted with Uncle Freddy's "perfectly designed barns / with the rounded roofs" (41), buildings that have outlived their usefulness since farmers no longer use horses. The fact is, in the world of Kroetsch's "Seed

Catalogue," we need horses and houses and gardens and the threshold of poetry that can supply them.

Susan Wood, less impressed than other readers of "Seed Catalogue," writes that "Kroetsch wavers uneasily between the poetic and the prosaic, unable to come to satisfying terms with either one. Unwilling to transcend the prairie town reality, which he records in its flat colloquial language, he ends by failing to illuminate it either" (36). As criticism, strictly speaking, this may all be true. But what is also true is that wavering uneasily between the poetic and the prosaic can have poetic (and prosaic) validity as an expression of the vernacular and the symphonic strategy of playing many voices off each other. The result of such effort is not necessarily about transcending or illuminating anything, but, as Cooley says, being open to our own prejudices and our own reading schemes:

--words from other discourses, with their own conventions, quite unlike those traditionally held to be essential in poetry-- enter the poem and ask of us a special reading. Ask to be read as poetry. They ask us not to take the words for granted, as unworthy references, not to receive them only as familiar windows on the world, or conveyors of large and ineradicable truths, or messages of deep import, not even as exercises in verbal ingenuity, but as words whose pace and force, and whose secondary meanings, now make them richer

and more telling. To really listen. (187)

The agricultural and linguistic threshold upon which "Seed Catalogue" rests allows us to hear those voices, rich and telling. The agricultural myth here has obviously been deliciously subverted, at the same time as it has been made central through the overriding symbol of the seed catalogue. The generally positive features of the agricultural myth have been altered through the poem's pervasive ironies, its ambivalence toward the farm, and its imagery of isolation, deprivation, and impermanence. But, strangely, the overwhelming mood of the poem does not suggest that the agricultural myth is not at work here, only that the myth has been transformed into a structure that can accomodate much more than Inge's original proposal. And given Kroetsch's own preoccupation with myth and demythologizing, this paradoxical myth that has developed is only apt.

Chapter 4

The Theatrical Farm in *Paper Wheat* and Other Plays

The study of agrarian thresholds takes on dramatic dimensions when it comes to theatre, because of the obvious margin between audience and play, a boundary that is both literal and figurative. The relationship between play and audience is also particularly intriguing since *Paper Wheat*, which will be the focus of this chapter, is not traditional realist drama, but more of a pageant (employing a whole array of theatrical techniques, including dance, juggling, and mime) in which the illusion of reality that is typical of realist drama is set aside. This is not drama that uses the convention of the “missing fourth wall” in which spectators imagine one part of the stage removed so that they can, in effect, eavesdrop on the events on stage, and pretend, in fact, that they are not in a theatre. Rather, this is a play that is always reminding us that it is a performance with actors constantly moving in and out of character, before the audience’s eyes, singing, tap dancing, juggling, miming events, in short, doing whatever the play requires.

And yet, *Paper Wheat* is also a play about the history of settlers and the cooperative movement, depicting actual historical people and events. The combination of “reality” and the self-reflexive mode of performance has the curious overall effect of making it seem both

“real” and not “real.” Robert C. Nunn quotes Paul Thompson on this effect in *The Farm Show*: “You have the reality and you have what we did in the play, and of course there’s a difference [. . .]. But to be confronted with the two is just fantastic because--you feel that you can respond to both--echoing off this one and echoing off that one” (52). Nunn draws out Thompson’s idea of “echoing” to underline the fact that the relationship “between the actuality of the subject and the actuality of the theatrical moment” is “directly apprehended in the immediate moment of the performance” (52). The threshold between the two makes for rich theatre.

One of the ways to examine both *Paper Wheat* and this rich meeting between the actual and the theatrical is to position both as part of the tradition of documentary theatre. Diane Bessai describes documentary theatre as a twentieth-century phenomenon, linked to the moving picture, and having its roots in the work of the director, Erwin Piscator, in the Germany of the 1920s. Piscator believed that theatre “must become a laboratory for examining the vast and coercive external forces (economic, political, social, technological) operating on the common man in the 20th century” (“Documentary Theatre” 13). This theatre also found its niche in 1960’s England with Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop, with its focus on political and working-class plays.

Alan Filewod traces documentary theatre in Canada in the 1960s,

when a unique form of drama, the collectively-created documentary play began as a form of alternative theatre that sought to break away from the past, a past in which most Canadian theatres were owned by American syndicates and/or managed by British directors, neither of whom were particularly receptive to plays about Canada or Canadians (viii). As a result of this frustration, and a deeply-felt desire to depict authentic Canadian concerns, the collectively-created documentary play rose to prominence, a style of theatre that delights in the possibilities inherent in theatrically representing the actual:

Documentary theatre tends to put the process by which it is created into the fore by including references to that process within the performance itself. In this way it breaks down the normal expectation of fiction on stage. At the same time it tends to include references and techniques which authenticate the play's claim to factual veracity. (Filewod ix-x)

This constant tension between the objectivity of "fact" and the self-aware theatrical rendering of that "fact" is characteristic of documentary theatre. Nunn takes this point one step further by adding the audience's role, when he says that documentary theatre "is a vehicle for exploring two areas of vital concern: the relation of theatrical performance to reality, and the relation of performers to their audience" (52).

In this way, the theme of cooperation in *Paper Wheat* can be linked to the actors' collaborative effort in creating the play: "The way *Paper Wheat* came together and the way it was performed are examples in action of the values the play supports. To make a cooperative is the work of a hundred hands; to make a collective like *Paper Wheat* is also the work of a hundred hands" (Kerr 30). The connection between the theme of cooperation and the cooperative venture in making the play is always made obvious to the audience. The actors make no attempt "to hide their own individual identities [. . .]. Quite literally then an audience saw not only characters working together but actors working together" (Nunn 54). The actuality and theatricality of the collective process in *Paper Wheat* is described well by Nunn:

The performance was a co-operative effort but was also designed to display the strong individuality of the performers; their personality, their ethnic identity, and most importantly their unique talents. Lubomir Mikiytiuk's [sic] juggling skill was highlighted, as were Sharon Bakker's skill at mimicking men, David Francis' dancing skills, Bill Prokopchuk's fiddling skills, Michael Fahey's guitar and banjo playing, and Skai Leja's strikingly beautiful singing [. . .]. Everybody in the cast owned some unique talent and displayed it so that it received the maximum degree of

attention. They owned them *and* they pooled them. (55)

The actors portray characters, but slip in and out of different roles so quickly that the audience can clearly see the mechanics of those portrayals. Lubomir Mykytiuk, for example, performs a juggling act in Act Two, as Louie, the son of a farm family, but comes out of character to comment on his own juggling abilities as an actor. Tossing a ball in the air and catching it with the back of his neck, he quips: "Three years in the Ukrainian National Circus for that one" (73). Don Kerr, the only critic who has written sensitively on *Paper Wheat* in any detail, furthers the analogy between making the play work and making the cooperatives work, and shows, in effect, a reciprocity between the agricultural experience of the prairies and this artistic construction of it: "The story of how the company made the play happen is not unlike a homesteader proving up his quarter section in dry weather and needing a lot of help from his friends to survive" (17).

Besides documentary theatre, *Paper Wheat* can also be linked to another main branch of theatre that broke away from realism. Bertolt Brecht's theatre was a direct response against the mainstream emotionally-based cathartic theatre of illusion. His main complaint with realist theatre--that had spread through many parts of the world since about 1850 when the evolution of modern lighting techniques and sophisticated staging allowed artists to present realistic "slice of life"

dramas--was its too-frequent function as an emotional purge for audiences, effective only in diverting momentarily, not in creating lasting social change. Brecht strove to weaken the empathetic bond between spectator and character through his alienation techniques. His "epic" theatre was designed to make the audience aware that they were in a theatre watching a play. Kerr draws our attention to the parallels with *Paper Wheat* which, he says,

is episodic. It constantly reminds us we're at a theatre, and while Lubomir Mykytiuk's juggling act is the epitome of showmanship in the play, partly because we don't expect a circus act in drama, in a way all the performances are like the juggling act, and audiences appreciate both the story and the way it is done. (23-24)

But *Paper Wheat* most directly grew out of a tradition of collective documentary theatre in eastern Canada, notably the work of Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille. Its popular play, *The Farm Show* (1972), was created by actors who interviewed farmers in the Clinton, Ontario, area and then staged an episodic play based on what they had learned. Theatre Passe Muraille's director, Paul Thompson, came to Saskatchewan with a group of actors in 1975 to research and perform *The West Show*, and so got involved with 25th Street House Theatre (as it was then called). This event would supply this hungry regional Saskatoon theatre with the impetus to create *Paper Wheat*. Twenty-

five years after *Paper Wheat*, agrarian theatre is still very popular, as the success of Dan Needles' Walt Wingfield series and the recent play, *The Drawer Boy*, by Michael Healey attests.

The concept of the collectively-created play itself provides a critique of the traditional sense of the author. Those involved in putting together a collectively-inspired play can find that the death of the author, so to speak, can be liberating, but it can also be downright frightening. As Kerr says,

Actors were now both writers and actors and what went wrong was entirely their responsibility. Sometimes there was no creativity at all, or invention could misfire and produce awful results, some of which were staged opening night. [. . .] it's a process where you look at your own mediocrity every day. (20)

As well, the collective creation, in which actors can portray different characters every night, if need be, and in which the play can continually evolve depending on what "worked" the night before, seriously undermines the concept of the "text" as authority. Further, as Bessai says, since collaborative theatre is primarily a "director's theatre," the published texts (including the text of *Paper Wheat*) "read better as notations for performance than as fully developed plays" ("Documentary into Drama" 186). So, with that caveat in mind, I will approach the text with the full knowledge that the idea of any one text

being an authority, especially in collective drama, is a convenient fiction.

Paper Wheat, created in 1977, was a huge popular success, receiving a standing ovation on opening night in Sinteluta, Saskatchewan, a level of enthusiasm that spurred it on to a second tour later that year, and a national tour in 1979. Its instant success was not due to its polish or professionalism; indeed, the actors admit that opening night, being the play's first entire run-through at one time, was a shambles. What propelled the audience in Sinteluta to its feet that night was more the pleasurable shock of seeing itself reflected in art. As Don Rubin says, "the show made genuine connections with its farm audiences and was sold-out in communities that had never before realized that theatre could actually be about them" (9). Albert Kish's film version of the second tour makes that plain as well, as his camera pans over the audience revealing a sense of wonder on the faces of the spectators.

That first night in Sinteluta was fortunate for the company. E.A. Partridge, one of the play's heroes, had first homesteaded in the Sinteluta area, and it was one of the communities where the actors in the collective had gone to research their subject, talking to people about early days on the prairie and the beginnings of the cooperative movement. The crowd was bound to be sympathetic and forgiving, and

it was.

Layne Coleman, a member of the company watching from the audience that night, saw

scenes he couldn't understand and others so embarrassing he hid in the cloakroom until they were over. In one scene a man's wife died because he was too cheap to get a doctor and at the end he was rocking his baby which was a bundle of sheets. The audience laughed and the company had succeeded in reducing tragedy to vaudeville. (Kerr 17)

Bob Bainborough, one of the actors in the original version, describes the audience that night in Sintaluta, 350 people in a hall designed for 150, sitting through three solid hours of scenes. At the end, the audience "went crazy":

I have never experienced a moment like that curtain call. The hall was cheering and yelling and clapping and standing - - all hell had broken loose. It was the most gratifying and exciting moment I have ever experienced. It was indescribable. Was the play that good? No. In fact, it was awful. But there was a spark there that those people in Sintaluta saw and liked. (34)

The spark became a veritable flame as *Paper Wheat* went on to a finer shaping, to play over two hundred performances, to be televised by the CBC, and to have its second tour recorded by the National Film Board.

This popularity derives from its unabashed depiction of the agricultural myth, in its simple form, as detailed by Inge. The play expects its audience to celebrate the hard-working, courageous farmer as he battles the forces of industry and capitalism, and to champion his vision of an idealized social order.

There are actually three staged versions of *Paper Wheat*. The first one, that opened so memorably in Sintaluta, was directed by Andras Tahn, and toured Saskatchewan in the spring of 1977 (it has never been published). The second version was directed by Guy Sprung, who, having co-founded Half Moon Theatre, a successful London fringe theatre, was a person familiar with collective, left-leaning enterprises. Sprung changed the play considerably, reworking a lot of the original material and adding some new scenes. This second version, touring Saskatchewan in the fall of 1977 (with a five-day Toronto appearance near the beginning of the tour), was published in volume seventeen of *Canadian Theatre Review*.

The third version toured nationally through the summer and fall of 1979, playing in 46 different towns and cities, including Ottawa, Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto. This third version, published in *Paper Wheat: The Book*, is the text I will be referring to in this chapter. Textually, this third version is much the same as the second, with only minor changes made by Andras Tahn. In performance, the third version was more professional in terms of props and costumes,

“but they also took away from the simplicity of the first version and the sense of the actors having made do with their own resources. The play began as a quarter section homesteader; by its third tour it owned a section of good land” (Kerr 22).

The play has generated mixed responses. It has earned scorn, some of it mild, some of it intense, as well as various shades of qualified and unqualified praise. Filewod is one of those who harbors great reservations about the play, as he strongly implies that *Paper Wheat* is essentially fluff, “a sentimental tribute to the heirs of a glorified tradition” that “works best when it flatters the audience and embodies their prejudices” (98). Brian Brennan offers a common sentiment in the almost-praise category: “A folksy musical play about homesteading and wheat farming, it will never be regarded as a classic” (165). Brennan’s comment is ambiguous since he could be referring to the play’s inherent failure, or simply to the inherent failure of folksy musicals. Bessai, on the other hand, calls *Paper Wheat* a “landmark play,” an “ebullient epic-documentary collective creation” (“Centres” 187).

Bessai positions *Paper Wheat* as a major player in “the inauguration of indigenous modern prairie drama” (“Centres” 187), breaking away as it did from the “deterministic notion of rural desperation and defeat though its themes of community co-operation and collectivity” (“Centres” 189). *Paper Wheat* does not tell the stereotypical story of

agrarian drought and gloom, or rather it does not do this in a sentimental way, even though the temptation to do so is powerful when working with such story material. What it does insist on is comedy as a narrative vehicle to suggest the continual renewal and hope of building new worlds. As Kerr so ably says: "*Paper Wheat* knows how to play to a popular audience yet it never played down to that audience. It is a very sophisticated piece of popular theatre, whose best scenes in performance were so rich and well done they could be enjoyed again and again" (29).

The play's power also comes out of its simplicity. Even in its more accessorized third version, the play still relied on a sparse set, an illustrated backdrop, and simple props, like a table and chairs, a blanket representing a field; a bun, that gets juggled and eaten, representing the yield from farming. James Reaney, an influential Canadian poet and playwright, has argued for the richness that simplicity can sometimes bring. His vision of the potential for the theatrical space can explain, in part, the enthusiastic response that *Paper Wheat* drew from its audiences. Speaking about the bare Stratford stage, Reaney argues how such a space impressed him with its possibilities, refocussing the emphasis on words and gestures, away from the technology behind intricate sets and complex lighting cues. Reaney bemoans the insistence on theatre of illusion and the necessity of its "box set being changed every ten minutes" (144). In

the well-made play, Reaney argues, “the set and the lighting quite frequently are doing what the word used to be able to do, and I object to my soul being squeezed through a fuse box” (144). Not surprisingly, then, the clean lines and immediacy of a play like *Paper Wheat*, that relies on words and movement, can be refreshing:

once you’ve seen a play like *Paper Wheat* nothing seems more obvious than putting plays together that way, as a series of episodes that tell a story, and mixing together whatever the story needs: mixing all the arts--mime, song, dance, dialogue, oratory; mixing literary genres--comedy and tragedy, the domestic and the heroic; doing, in fact, whatever is necessary to tell the story. (Kerr 23)

The straightforwardness of such a strategy has the effect sometimes of allowing audiences to become more active in their watching role: “quite often primitive productions force the audience to work out richness in the way that a “properly” designed and “competently” acted version miserably does not” (Reaney 146). This also can help to explain the success of the fringe theatre festivals across Canada, and the enthusiasm that fringe audiences bring to these “primitive” plays.

But before I turn to the text of *Paper Wheat*, I will briefly look at two other agrarian plays that have benefitted from what Bessai has described as the legacy of *Paper Wheat*: “the inauguration of indigenous modern prairie drama” (“Centres” 187). Barbara

Sapergia's *Roundup* (1992) is a play that traces the agricultural crisis of the 1980s through the personal story of one farm family in southwestern Saskatchewan, the Petrescus. Facing drought, falling grain prices, and the increasing industrialization of agriculture, the Petrescus are forced to contemplate the prospect of giving up the farm. These large social problems are also reflected in the more personal marital problems of Paul and Verna, the farm couple, both in their late forties. Paul is a farmer who is still firmly committed to farming as a way of life and strongly identifies with the surrounding landscape. Verna, however, feels mostly bitter and simply wants out of both the farm and the marriage. Pointing to the hills near their farm, Paul says to Verna: "That's part of me. And the shape of that sky, I know that sky. I don't want another one" (61). But Verna feels no such affinity and wants different horizons. Like Judith in *Wild Geese*, Verna is fed up with the farm. She feels unappreciated, that she has thrown her life away to "the cold and the loneliness and the boredom" (18).

The tensions that result from Paul and Verna's struggle crystallize around their seventeen-year-old daughter, Darcy. Darcy first appears in the play as she is being pulled between two highly-gendered sites, the house and barn. Her mother wants her in the house to help prepare a meal, and her father wants her outside at the corral to help brand calves. In the long term, Verna wants Darcy to leave the farm

and go to university; Darcy, however, seems more aligned with Paul, and only wants a future on the farm. Darcy likes to hear the old stories of the farm, the myth of cooperation and the romantic “simple life” of the past. Verna’s response to Darcy’s idealism is full of bitterness: “Oh yes. It was simpler, all right. Life’s a lot simpler when you don’t know what’s going on in the world. When you don’t have any schooling past grade eight. When you don’t have any choices” (17). When Darcy invokes the beauty of the prairie landscape as a way of softening the realities of the modern farm, Verna retorts: “Oh yes. There’s the other great myth. Our problems all fade away when we see a wheat field blowing in the breeze. [. . .] Darcy, we can sit here until the banks take away all our land. Nobody’ll even notice. And I will not be bought off by a few prairie sunsets” (19).

The family’s stresses peak at the roundup, the annual ritual of branding and castrating calves, a ritual in which animals are pinioned and emasculated, a not unfitting symbol for the farmer himself. The roundup is also an appropriate symbolic threshold for the farm crisis, and the farmers’ own personal trials, as it combines hard work with a significant level of danger, but also suggests a strong sense of community activity in which many people come together to work and, not insignificantly, eat. The roundup supper that the women prepare in the house through the course of the play is the centrepiece of the roundup as well as being the heart of *Roundup*, the play itself. As Tom

Bentley-Fisher, the play's director, says, the set

demanded from the actors detailed task-oriented activity.

An entire meal for ten people was actually made on stage,

and much attention paid to the jobs required to be

accomplished throughout the day of the roundup. This

allowed little time for the characters to deal with the

issues important to them. Rather, it forced the

characters realistically to earn their way and to deal with

their personal agendas through the relationships involved in

completing the tasks at hand. (Foreword)

Fittingly then, the constant "woman's work" that Verna complains about as not being valued on the farm is foregrounded in the play. The ceaseless work that bores and irritates Verna is made concrete on the stage, giving texture to her emotions.

The play is also a debate between industrial farming practices and land stewardship. Eileen, a neighboring farmer who is helping at the roundup, is seeking the NDP nomination in the next election.

Frustrated by the decline of the family farm and the abuse of the land, Eileen is committed to trying to improve the state of agriculture through politics. Eileen's personal and political adversary is Harvey Flint, a wealthy neighbor, who is also a farm chemicals dealer in town. He is the representative of agribusiness, a farmer who no longer has any personal connection to the soil. Flint farms "second-hand," hiring

employees to do the actual labor of the farm, while he concentrates mainly on his business in town. Visiting the Petrescus in order to make an offer to buy their farm, he boasts about his computerized operation and his high-tech embryo transplant program, designed to produce a herd of pure-bred calves in a short time. For Flint, as his name would suggest, money is the bottom line, the "[o]nly way to get ahead these days" (39).

But the play is careful not to oversimplify the situation, and it resists the impulse to make Flint the simple villain. His view of the farm as a business is given credence through the story he tells Eileen of his father who lost not only his money but his will to live during the Depression. The father's farm failure is a trace that is always present for the son, hovering like a dolorous ghost. Flint is adamant that he will be different: "I decided I was never gonna be like that. I wasn't gonna be a sitting duck for the banks or the government or anybody. I call my own shots" (56).

The play ends in a hopeful and melancholy way. The Petrescus resolve some of their personal problems and turn down Flint's offer to buy their farm. Darcy reveals that she is pregnant and that she and Greg, Eileen's son, will stay on the farm to continue the dream of agriculture as a way of life. But this renewal is strongly tempered by the realities that resist the dreams. The loss of the farm has only been postponed at the end of the play, a play that is very much aware

that there are no simple solutions. Paul acknowledges that he will almost certainly have to sell the farm in the near future, that *he* will “be the one who lost the home place” (33). The ramifications of such a loss reverberate through the play. Leaving the farm does not merely mean the end of a home or a job, but of a personal identity and the weighty and proud heritage of one’s ancestors. Verna’s despair and frustration cannot be assuaged anymore by simple hopes for a more prosperous future. The dangers she sees in the future are real, and are only deferred by her daughter’s aspirations. As Verna says to Eileen: “What if there’s no more next year country? What if it’s over? I talked to Paul’s sister last night--over near Swift Current. Their neighbour walked down to his barn . . . and shot himself. He couldn’t figure out how to save the farm” (33). The failed farmer, reminiscent of Flint’s father, appears again but takes on more tragic overtones. In other prairie texts, the barn has been the site of escape into a temporary solace or fantasy world, as in *The Lamp at Noon*. Here the barn is a more sinister site, the place of final escape through suicide.

Written as a Master’s thesis, Dale Lakevold’s *Wild Geese* (2000) is adapted from Martha Ostenso’s novel of the same name. The novel, a combination of prairie realism and romance, is an influential early prairie work, featuring another giant prairie farmer figure, Caleb Gare. Unlike *Roundup*, which is a realist play, the play which Lakevold

reimagines, *Wild Geese* reworked as a play, treats time as if it were a dream state. The play “takes place all at once--in a space of time that brings together past and future into a shifting present. [. . .] The characters enter onto a bare stage and perform as though re-enacting or remembering a dream” (72). Lakevold describes the challenge of creating a play from a novel:

The characters ride across the prairie in buggies and on horseback. They plow fields, shear sheep, milk cows, and clean stables. The main character dies by being swallowed alive in muskeg, his timber and crops in flames around him. It seems to be an awful lot of prairie to put up on stage. Yet, despite such physical limitations, the novel still seemed to offer many theatrical possibilities, particularly if its realism were suspended or transformed, and its romance foregrounded. (72)

Lakevold, in response to the problem of representing this unwieldy slice of prairie life in an enclosed theatrical space, recreates the sequence of the realist novel in a shifting temporal and spatial form. While shaping the play, Lakevold says, “I started to see the prairies in a new light. Its physical, boundless space was being changed into a kind of dream space” (90).

This dream space has interesting effects in at least two areas: the farmer figure and the boundaries between agricultural sites. The

play's shifting surface allows the characters a latitude that they do not have in the novel:

The dream has already happened, and the characters, in performing, are already aware of the outcome. [. . .] The characters become complicit in the performance of their drama without being able to alter their circumstances.

They perform with the knowledge of their past and future, and become engaged in a repetition of memory that will not release them until the story ends. (Lakevold 72)

They too are imprisoned in the cycle of repetitious work and isolation, but the knowing aspect of their characters adds a resonant dimension to the play. To this end, Lakevold employs a style of staging that keeps the characters on the stage at all times, so that even when they are not involved directly in a given scene, they are still connected to the action of the play: "They are present as observers and are called upon to observe or participate in various ways. They are part of the whole story" (1). For instance, in a small scene between Caleb and Ellen, one of his daughters, another character, who is not directly involved, but is still a physical part of the scene, enters onto the periphery. When Caleb tells Ellen that Malcolm, the "half-breed," is back in the area, Malcolm steps forward and Ellen looks at him. Caleb warns Ellen to stay away from him, and after a moment, when Ellen agrees, Malcolm leaves the scene while Ellen watches him retreat.

The play also expands the character of the central figure. Caleb Gare first appears in the play in much the same guise as in the novel: "Caleb enters with a lamp. He appears as a giant, casting long, moving shadows" (2). The Caleb of the novel is a villain, a tyrant who subjugates all those around him. He imprisons his wife, Amelia, with the secret knowledge of her bastard son, Mark, and uses the power of that secret to coerce her, in turn, to help subjugate their children and isolate them on the farm. Caleb does not change to any great degree throughout the course of the novel. Only at the end, when, ironically, he drowns in the midst of a fire which will destroy his precious flax, does he feel his failure. In the play, however, Lakevold consciously tries to create a character with contradictions. He does this partially through the play of light and shadow that can be created on the stage:

Throughout the play, he [Caleb] moves in and out of the light, one scene revealing his face and another scene obscuring it. Light or its absence suggests and exposes the ambiguities in Caleb's character. At one moment, he is a grotesque giant, and in the next, he is revealed as a vulnerable man. (84)

At the end of the play, the other characters describe Caleb's death as it is happening, in short spurts, to mimick the movement of Caleb's struggling as he is sucked down into the muskeg. Caleb kneels on the stage during this scene, but then stands at the end and imagines

himself as a young man who is starting all over again, his whole life ahead of him:

My wife steps out the door,
 and my daughters come running up to me.
 I run my hands through their hair, and I hug them.
 I'm on my horse, and I turn to wave.
 It's a new morning. In a new country.
 And all the years still lie before me. (68)

The other effect of transforming the novel's realism is the blurring of agrarian thresholds. When Lakevold began to work on the adaptation, it was close to the realism of the novel, with scenes set in a variety of locations such as the kitchen and the barn (73). When the play took on its dream structure, the sites became less precise, blending into one amorphous shifting place, the stage at turns suggesting the Gare house, a field, or the muskeg where Caleb dies. Caleb's first words in the play underscore how all-encompassing the space is: "From here I can see in all directions" (2). But by the end, the space is no longer imagined as Caleb's "kingdom," but as the Gare home into which Amelia leads Mark after Caleb's death.

Paper Wheat foregrounds many of the elements such as the realism of the task-oriented characters seen in *Roundup* and the suggestively bare stage seen in *Wild Geese*.

Paper Wheat begins with a series of short fast vignettes in Act One

that give thumbnail sketches of the experiences of immigrants coming to Canada: getting off the train, going out to the homestead, relying on neighbors, and dealing with cheating storekeepers and unscrupulous elevator agents. The opening train scene, "The last best West," introduces the audience to five immigrants, all coming from a different country and each expressing what has pushed them from their old country or what has pulled them towards Canada. Their stories are familiar. While looking for work in Liverpool, Sean, an Irishman from a family of eighteen, has seen the Canadian government advertisements with pictures of "golden fields of flowing wheat" (38). Vasil, a Ukrainian, can see no future at home except poverty, and has heard that "in Canada there is land" (38). Anna, travelling from eastern Europe with her family, describes the excitement of her younger siblings, and her own trepidation. William, an Englishman, had been working on his father's farm in Lancashire while his brothers, "poor sods," all went to the mills. He describes the effects of the industrial revolution, rolling its grey clouds over cities and farms alike. He also makes it clear that he is leaving behind a class system that absorbs most of what he makes on the farm, a social structure that is symbolized by "those nobs chasing their bloody foxes across my land all the time." In Canada, William will be his "own master" (38). Elizabeth, William's new wife, is expecting the best of her new beginning. All of the new immigrants share a hope for a better life in a

new country.

These short speeches in the first scene are interspersed with song. The actors in the opening scene portray their individual characters, but also come together in between each speech to sing a song from the point of view of the Canadian government as it lured new settlers to the west. The train that they are riding on becomes the ultimate threshold image of the new settlers' personal ambitions as well as the country's political ambitions, a significance that one of the songs makes clear: "We got sixty million dollars' ridin' on this game / We can't let our iron horse pull up lame / Our national dream is a monetary scheme" (38). The sonorous refrain of the song, "Roll out those rails," highlights the threshold image, the knife edge of experience the immigrants find themselves on.

The wide-eyed innocence of the settlers is juxtaposed with the cynicism of their new country:

Well, Louis Riel he was on the rise
With the Indian and the Metis and a battle cry.
We sent troops on the railroad to beat 'em at Batoche
Now ship the immigrants to pay the cost. (38)

We are reminded from the outset of perspective, that these immigrants have a purpose to fulfill, and are part of a larger narrative that they themselves may not understand. Similarly, the actors in this first scene play two roles, switching effortlessly between individual

immigrant and government chorus. This has the immediate effect of alerting the audience that the actors themselves have more than one purpose, and that perspectives will shift quickly. The effect of seeing the actors as settlers, singing about how they are being used, effectively makes complex what on the surface is a simple scene.

These characters reappear throughout the first act to tell stories of early farm life on the prairies. But it is important to realize that they are not fully fleshed in the way that traditional realist characters are, nor does the play try to make them so. The

characterization is not psychological or complex, but only as complex as the idea of a scene demands. For instance, the elevator agent must plausibly cheat the Irish farmer and Sean has first to hope for the best and then get furious. The point of the scene is not to make Sean and the agent as much like full, complex human beings as possible; but to illustrate with liveliness and clarity one of the turn-of-the-century swindles that inspired the forming of the Grain Growers' Grain Company. (Kerr 24-25)

Nevertheless, in the simple didacticism of some of these scenes lies a quality that troubles some critics. The anecdotal style of the play means a commitment to narrative more than to character development.

In the scene that Kerr is commenting on, "Who are the scales

working for today?", the agent gets Sean to shovel and sweep the grain out of his truck before weighing it, so that Sean has no recourse when he disagrees with the grade and quantity of his flax. The villainous elevator agent locks the scales off at a false reading with the judicious use of a wad of chewing gum. The conflict here parallels that between agribusiness and agriculture. The settler wants to make an income from farming, of course, but he also wants a life and a future on the prairies through agriculture, whereas the elevator agent, in this scene, wants to make a quick and dishonest buck.¹

The same story is told in an earlier scene, "Welcome to Saskatchewan." Vasil, who signs a contract with the storekeeper, John Pearson, the so-called "farmer's friend" (39), cannot read the fine print that will ensure that if he fails to pay for the supplies after harvest, John not only gets the implements back, but also Vasil's land. As John says to his assistant Charlie, "he looks like he might make a go of it. But don't worry, the odds are in our favor. That's the fifth time we've sold that stuff" (40). The storekeeper is happy to make a profit off the failure of the farmer. The difference between the scenes is that, in the later one, Sean, unlike Vasil, at least knows that he is being swindled. Sean is not the innocent, but engages in a banter with the elevator agent that suggests that he knows how to play the game. He denies that his flax has been rained on or that his grain is

dirty, insisting good-naturedly that “a Canada Goose got me on the way in” (54) to the elevator. The farmers’ eventual unwillingness to be the hapless victims reaches fruition when William, Vasil, and Sean come together in “Exercise!” to “go to the elevator agent and [. . .] get little bit of exercise” (55), a rebellion that closes Act One and heralds the more organized political rebellion of Act Two.

Dick Harrison, in speaking of the machine in prairie realism, remarks that industrialization was linked with the “social and economic machinery” (*Unnamed* 119) that was part of the development of grain growing associations in the 1920s: “Far from seeing them as any threat to agrarian ideals, the farmers who banded together to protect their way of life with grain growers’ associations were eager to adopt some of that machinery by forming corporations to market grain and other commodities” (*Unnamed* 120). Harrison describes this “dream” as “the corporate extension of the garden myth, a prelapsarian view of the business world” (*Unnamed* 120).

The cooperative movement that farmers begin to develop politically in Act Two is anticipated in other ways in Act One. In “The broken plow,” for instance, cooperation proves to be a complicated ideal to achieve, since it often conflicts with an individual’s sense of free enterprise. William breaks his plow, but when Vasil offers to loan him his, William, the rugged individualist who has come to the prairie “to be my own master” (38), cannot accept what he sees as charity. Only

when Vasil cleverly asks William's help in digging a well, can William accept the loan of the plow, because the exchange of favors will allow him to save face. Nunn underscores the political positioning in this scene: "Bill Postlethwaite painfully sets aside his adherence to the ethic of private enterprise [. . .]. If Bill can change, it is implied, anybody can" (53).

But the farmer as master of his own fate is one of the traditional characteristics of the farmer figure in literature. In "His grain is just a bit better than everyone else's," the idea of pooling grain in order for farmers to have more power as a group is suggested by Anna when, driven by loneliness, she goes over to visit Elizabeth. They talk about the upcoming grain growers' meeting that their husbands will attend. But here, too, the spirit of cooperation is not sentimentally celebrated as the answer to everyone's problems. Rather, it is undercut slightly by individualist sentiment. As Elizabeth says to Anna, the prospect of all farmers agreeing on something is in doubt, as "Willie says his grain is just a bit better than everyone else's" (53).

Comedy in *Paper Wheat*, whether subtle, as above, or more overt, serves as the vehicle for exploring the grim threshold of turn-of-the-century prairie agriculture. "Old Bessie," which was in the original production and survived in the later versions as well, reveals the endless toil of women, immortalized at the end of the scene in song. Using rhyme to comically list the incredible feats of the prairie woman,

the song combines the realities of early farm life, such as bearing many children in a small dwelling, to the extravagant claims of the final line:

I've seen her haul a rack of hay that'd break a camel's
back,
She bore me fifteen children in our little sod house shack,
She's hauled our grain in the dead of night, pulled the
horses from the mire,
One night she nursed me through the flu and fought a
prairie fire. (51)

The hyperbole of the song is borne out by the rest of the scene. William, when Elizabeth tells him his lunch is not ready yet, graciously declares, "That's alright. I'll tell you what. While you're getting it ready I'll go and have a sit-down on the porch. I'm a bit tired" (51). Sean and the fiddler join him and while they sing, Elizabeth, in the background, aptly demonstrates the house as site of continual toil. She works at a "frenzied pace," doing the breakfast dishes, finishing the wash, ironing a shirt, sewing on a button, and making lunch, all the while planning tomorrow's work schedule, which includes getting up at three so she can make William's breakfast and pack his lunch so he can go to the meeting, then milking the cow, cleaning out the chicken coop, fixing the garden fence, putting down some more gopher poison, and digging the potatoes. At the end of the scene, Elizabeth, who has been

meekly apologetic as the long-suffering farmer's wife, comes forward and ties the apron around William's waist, in a comically visual counterpoint to her frustration with the tedium of the farm woman's sphere.

Similarly, in "Breaking the prairie," Sean's comic monologue to his stubborn oxen about the drudgery of breaking the hard soil (the field as site of endless frustration) is lightened by his alternating of insults (calling the beasts "Protestants") and of promises (if things do not improve, he will take them home with him to Ireland and buy them "a round of Guinness") (48). In "Consolation," Sean sings about his prairie home, a song that comically represents the monotony of the prairie itself with its endless repetition: "Well, the land goes on and on and on / And on and on and on [. . .] (Spoken) Then there was a tree. / And on and on and on. . . (46). Highlighting the very real sense of isolation that new settlers felt on their homesteads where neighbors were few and far between, Sean makes his point through comedy in order to avoid the heavy-handed sentimentality that so commonly accompanies pioneer stories, and that, in the view of some readers, jeopardizes the play itself. For example, when Sean describes being a bachelor living alone in a tiny dwelling, he seems to be setting up a predictable scene, but he plays with our expectations:

Well, baching on the prairies wasn't exactly the good life
without the woman around to take care of the home life.

But there was one thing to be said for my tarpaper shack.
You could get up in the morning, get washed, make
breakfast, have a cup of tea . . . and not even get out of
bed. (46)

The comic ending has the effect of allowing the audience an outlet through laughter while still telling the story of isolation on the prairie. What is Sean's "consolation" in this scene also becomes the audience's.

In Act Two, a similar kind of scene, "Drought," uses a joke with its device of outrageous reversal to describe the Depression, to tell it anew. A farmer describes his young son, who having grown up through the worst of the drought, has never seen rain. When a couple of big drops hit him in the face one day, he faints from the shock. The farmer says, "I had to stoop down, pick up a handful of dirt and throw it on his face. That revived him" (68). The humor tells the story of drought in a way that does not allow for sentimentality.

In contrast to *Paper Wheat* whose style allowed it to break out of the mold of grim artistic depictions of the Depression, *The Drylanders*, a project of the National Film Board, is a moving film about settlers enduring the 1930s on the prairies. Unlike *Paper Wheat*, it uses traditional realism to tell its story, in which humor has no part. While it does depict the same themes as *Paper Wheat*, such as cooperation and the resilience of the farmer, it describes the heartbreak of the

Depression in a tragic mode. The film follows one family who moves west from Ontario through the poignant but predictable trials of settlement to the first few good harvests and then finally details the deprivations and humiliations of the Depression. One of the sons ends up drifting away from the farm, only to join the relief lines in the city. Another son, now married with children, sticks it out on the farm. The black-and-white scenes of the film are pale with poverty and hardship. In one scene at the supper table, the grandson complains about having to eat beans again. The family, forced into the indignity of having to take charity from the relief trains, is further saddened to see their friends and closest neighbors give up the farm and move further west, to Alberta. The climax of the film comes when the patriarch of the family dies just before the rains come, signalling the end of the Depression.

Pacey noted the effect of the Depression on the movement from romanticism to realism. Similarly, Harrison argued that the Depression damaged the garden myth as a way of reading the land. *The Drylanders* is a good example of a realist depiction in which the garden myth only functions as a faint source of hope before the drought. *Paper Wheat*, however, takes the realism of early prairie agriculture, but colors it with the creative capacity of the garden myth (in the form of the farmer's belief that they can control agriculture through cooperatives) and the regenerative ability of humor.

Paper Wheat avoids unrelenting gloom, not only through its use of comedy, but through its inventive staging. Another scene from the original *Paper Wheat* that survived to the later versions is "Squeezing the Land," a scene that is appealing in its marriage of gesture and dialogue. Elizabeth and William again introduce a predictable-enough storyline, talking about their land and the crops and the weather. As the stage directions indicate, what gives the scene its edge is how they "tell the story of their land by folding, furrowing and squeezing a rough grey blanket on a table" (42), the blanket almost magically becoming the agricultural site, the field, in front of the audience's eyes. Elizabeth and William's words and gestures allow the audience to focus on the blanket as if it were literally the story of the land, a complex threshold symbol of hope and despair, success and failure. Robert Enright describes the scene on stage:

In a good year the blanket is neatly folded and carried to market; in a bad year the blanket all but slips through the couple's fingers. When rain finally follows drought, the couple lift the blanket above them and it bellies out like a great grey sail in a gentle wind. It is art deftly turned to message. The simple visual narrative becomes a lesson in summer fallowing and crop rotation. What emerges is not only an image of the tenacious Prairie farmer, but also of the moral man who recognizes the need for responsible soil

management. It's as if you crossed W.O. Mitchell with J.S. Woodsworth, and the effect is artful politics. (44d)

The gestures and the threshold image of the blanket take the mundane story of bumper crop, early frost, hail and drought, and tell it anew so that the final speeches in the scene, with their utter simplicity and brevity, can carry added significance:

ELIZABETH: We learned to make a living.

WILLIAM: Aye. This is our living.

ELIZABETH: This is our land. (43)

"Making a living" by the end of the scene is not just a figure of speech. Something has been made in front of the audience's eyes. The blanket has allowed the spectator to think of the land as a palpable thing, and the "making" of it as synonymous with "making a living," living a life by farming on the prairie. The simplicity of the gesture allows the audience an artful window into the complexity of farming as an active process.

Act Two takes the link between living and land into the political arena. It begins once again with the train, as did Act One, but here we are introduced to Ed Partridge, a farmer from the Sintaluta area, who is getting ready to go to Winnipeg to visit the Grain Exchange to see how the farmers' crops are marketed, why prices fluctuate, and who is responsible for grain prices. The scene is set in 1905, but could be set plausibly anytime in the twentieth century. The image of the train

is this time marking the boundary between agriculture and agribusiness in its broad sense. Ed complains that farmers are being taken advantage of: "When I first started farming, when they skinned the wheat they removed just the bran. Now when they skin the wheat they skin the farmer right along with it" (56). The train that he is waiting for also represents the boundary between the farmer as self-sufficient producer and the farmer as hick. Ed compares the farmers with mushrooms because "we're kept in the dark and we're fed manure" (56). He does not expect to be graciously welcomed in Winnipeg, in part, because of the grain traders' perception of him as a hick, but he is determined: "a lot of people think that we're only hayseeds, but I believe that we farmers are going to change the world" (56).

As in Act One, a song accompanies this sentiment, this time "The grain exchange rag" in which the actors take on the role of the Grain Exchange which plays "Bump the Bumpkin" and perform as a coterie of high-powered financial magnates. The song is comical because of the rhymes that bring together the semantically and socially incongruous: "Those old farmers haven't a prayer; / Who wants high finance in long underwear?" (57). Ed Partridge is the hero of Act Two, the simple farmer who refuses to play the country bumpkin, and keeps working until his dream of a grain cooperative in which farmers benefit in marketing their work becomes a reality.

The evolution of Ed Partridge through subsequent versions of *Paper Wheat* is an interesting one. The original version presented him as a complex character in a series of scenes "in which we are shown a cross section of political attitudes and the cost the radical politician pays for his beliefs and leadership" (Kerr 26). In that more unwieldy version, Partridge is a politician who must defend the actual nuts-and-bolts of the cooperative movement. Sprung's later version streamlined the Partridge sequences, a decision which made sense considering the simple themes of the play, but Kerr argues that the original sequence

is attractive partly because it has not precisely calculated what our response to it should be. By version two *Paper Wheat* is a very clear play which knows how an audience is to respond to almost every scene. The first Partridge sequence is more like an actual political meeting where we might want to argue after the passage is over about what it means and who was right and by how much. (26)

Instead, the Partridge of this later version is the philosopher of "Ed's book," who only makes allusions to the difficulties when he talks about the writing of his book, *War on Poverty*. Here, Partridge is the simple hero and the enemy is the grain conglomerates, the five big grain companies that Partridge sees on the Grain Exchange where they have a monopoly on marketing. In his report to the farmers back

home, Partridge says, "They determine how high and how low prices will be. I believe that they are in league to undermine the farmer and exploit us in every way possible" (58). Partridge's vision of what will right the balance involves a farmer-based marketing system in which the profits go directly back to the producers. The mime, called "Grain Growers' Grain Company," visually underlines the message as four farmers come on stage with "sorrowful expressions," each carrying a small sheaf of wheat. "Slowly, one by one, they put their individual sheaves together. Their expressions change as all their wheat becomes one big sheaf" (59). The Grain Growers' Grain Company is thus born with the cooperative ideal at its centre, evident in the song the company performs, "The man from Sintaluta": "People working for their own survival. / We don't own the land, we only farm it. / Production for use not profit for the few" (64).

The proponents of agribusiness are represented by the villainous capitalists, like the elevator magnates and tycoons of "Mystery theatre" who in an effort to sabotage the new grain company, hire a reporter to publish anonymous letters denigrating the farmer. The political impact is lost a bit in a rather confusing scene in which details of the scheme are related through an old-style radio play.

But there are other more obvious impediments to the cooperative dream. For instance, the "Leo" scene bursts with the comedy of people trying to sign up half of all the seeded acreage in Saskatchewan

in order to form the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. All the celebrated inducements are here: the chocolate cake bribe, the motivation of raising skirt hems, the priest's marathon sermons, and the "Pool cut" at the barber's: "We trim your hair just right and we save it. Then when you need it most, we return it to you as a rebate in the form of a wig" (66). But as Kerr points out, the heroic and sentimental aspects of the story are tempered by not only the comedy, but by the structure of the scene which "is framed by Farmer Leo, the crabby know-it-all and a most uncooperative farmer. He's the raw material the promoters have to deal with" (29). All the vignettes in the "Leo" scene are interspersed with increasingly jubilant fiddle music, and Farmer Leo himself, the cynic, scoffing at the system with its "patronage dividends or whatever the hell they call it" (64), and adamantly declaring that the organizers will never sign up the required six million acres.

Leo, of course, is swept up by the victory of the Pool in the end--this *is* a comedy--and adds his own two hundred acres to the cause, which puts them over the top, a fact he celebrates with a robust and ironic shout: "I TOLD YOU WE COULD DO IT!" (67), as the fiddler goes wild. The increasing urgency of this scene, as the Pool comes closer and closer to becoming a reality, is capped by the theatrical and frenetic dance of two people using two tap shoes between them. At the end, they turn their backs triumphantly to the audience, revealing

suddenly the message on the backs of their shirts: "Wheat Pool 1924" (67).

The theatricality with which the cooperative ideal is espoused is matched by the later high-spirited repudiations of cooperation such as the 1960's rock-style "Co-op song" which sings a hymn to "lots of Free Enterprise": "The only pool I want is in my backyard" (70). Similarly, "Togetherness" depicts a 1970's farm family who eats their coop peas and butter and pickles, and winters in Arizona. When Sis in that scene brings up the break-up of the small family farm (like their own), Pa and Louie segue into talk of professional sports as a future for Louie who will not be able to afford to take over the farm. When Sis brings up the cooperatives' transformation into a "multi-million-dollar operation[. . .] no different from any big business" which treats employees poorly, Ma blithely replies, "Co-ops are for people -- not for employees. Now have some co-op peas dear" (72). In Ma's naming of employees as something other than people, it is hard to distinguish her from the worst of the agribusiness crowd. In further irony, the anniversary pin celebrating fifty years of cooperatives is made in the USA and Pa bemoans the cooperatives that have pushed others out of business: "Around here when they talk about mixed farming they mean curling and co-ops" (72).

Lubomir Mykytiuk's juggling act at the end of "Togetherness" was, fittingly, structurally, the showstopper of the play in terms of

theatricality. Louie and Sis launch themselves into an impromptu vaudeville act as Louie juggles and Sis assists by clanging little cymbals to highlight his talents. Louie gives his parents an economics lesson by simultaneously juggling a bun while eating it, the bun representing a loaf of bread, and the crumb that is left at the end that gets kicked into the audience, demonstratively, unexpectedly, representing the farmer's share. The scene is at once highly entertaining and intensely meaningful.

The more modern scenes bridge the gap between the beginning of the cooperative movement and the role of cooperatives in contemporary society. "Togetherness" and the "Co-op song" allow other voices to be heard, along with Louise Lucas, who laments the uneven division of wealth in Depression society and an economic system that can see a glut of wheat on world markets while children go to bed hungry, a system that "puts human greed above the supplying of human need" (69).

The final scene, "The old folks," presents the company as oldtimers reminiscing about the past. Mrs. Williams talks about how the land her father homesteaded is being sold to a stranger. The sod-buster ends the play with his nostalgic speech about fires and blizzards, bumper crops and drought, but also the bewildering thought that his son could now be worth a million and a quarter dollars. His final lines yearn for a time when change was not just possible but

probable: "You know, I'd give it all to be young again. To hold my hands on the handles of a plough. To smell the warm earth and see it fall aside in waves, right to each side, smooth as water. I'd give it all to be young again and feel that I could change the world" (75). This obvious appeal to our emotions works in a sensuous way, through the feeling of hands on the plough, the smell of soil, the sight of rich earth, the sense of purpose, perhaps, of living at the centre of things. As Enright says, "By the end of the scene you have a lump in your throat the size of a Prairie sod" (44d).

Other reviewers have remained less touched. Martin Knelman in an unsympathetic review of *Paper Wheat* calls the play's success "preposterous" (60), describing the "rural folksiness" and the "yokel gags" of the "Canadian outback" as "the kind of theatre that appeals especially to people who normally don't go to the theatre" (62). In his review, Knelman sets himself up as an ingenuous urban sophisticate who was "afraid" to attend *Paper Wheat*: "What if, trying to infiltrate an audience of simple people taking their noble backwoods pleasures, I were found out and ridiculed for my corrupt big-city ways?" (62). As Kerr dryly comments, "Knelman would not have gone down well in Sintaluta" (22). But beyond the conceit of the "poor city-dweller," perhaps Knelman's urban grounding allows him a perspective that could be helpful here. Knelman especially deplores the simplicity in the play's depiction of the noble farmer versus the wicked capitalist:

The audience is not allowed to get the impression that the farmers who banded together to form the Wheat Pools could have been motivated by anything as crass as economic self-interest. The farmers, you see, are proletarian heroes rising up against the nasty exploiters. Presumably it's all that direct contact with nature that makes them so noble. These aren't mere workers trying to make a buck, they're visionaries bent on reforming the wayward world. (62)

Though Knelman deflates his own argument moments later by linking this wholesale wrongheadedness with that of the NFB, the CBC, and the Canada Council, his point is still valid. The play is certainly skewed to one side of the story (although it does not entirely exclude the other). The audience *is* expected to see the farmers as heroes working together for a better world. The play is unapologetic for the agrarian myth that informs it. As much as Knelman argues that its "reality" is flawed, the myth is what gives the play its force. Further, the simplicity of *Paper Wheat* does not justify certain criticism of the play. It chooses to tell one of the many agrarian stories of the West. Even Filewod, who has implied that *Paper Wheat* is mere fluff, sees that in the play "fact and fiction flow into each other to define a heroic myth" (111). Kerr would agree: "One of its major functions indeed is to distill from history a simple and intense myth by which people today

can still live; a myth of cooperation, of people able to alter the world” (28). Knelman chooses not to see the balance that exists in the play, and indeed the richness of the contradictions that make the threshold between play and audience so resonant. But the balance is there, the hope that

is grounded by skepticism. People win but they are rarely perfect. Farmer Leo is as typical as Louise Lucas. The story is heroic but it is also down to earth -- it is about a great human venture, the settling of the West and the founding of a massive cooperative, yet we most often view that heroic adventure from a quarter section, or the kitchen, or the barber shop. (Kerr 29)

That kind of balance resonates for people generally, rural and urban.

The paper of *Paper Wheat* refers, of course, to the commodification of the crop itself, into a monetary abstraction, that symbol of capitalism that sets itself apart from human need. The title suggests the axis along which the play flows: the contrast between community and commodity. But the paper of *Paper Wheat* can also stand for the text of the play, performance rendered into paper, that in turn is rendered into performance again, a process that is equally abstracting and yet meaningful. Whether on stage or on paper, theatre is always about community, the stories we tell each other.

Paper Wheat succeeds because it “shows us intensely things we know

well, how people come together to work, how important and substantial human endeavor can be" (Kerr 30).

Notes

¹ The narrator of Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* tells a story of an elevator agent's ruse in which he tells a farmer with a load of number two wheat that he has no more room in his storage bins except for one bin that already has some number five wheat in it. The farmer can sell his wheat at number five or take it home again. The farmer "needed money; he had come eighteen miles; his horses were tired and not of the strongest. He sold. At once a rumour sprang up that this was a put-up game to 'do' the farmer; a few years later such things drove thousands into the pools" (175).

Lean Harvests or Bumper Crops: A Conclusion

It is difficult to make any meaningful pronouncements at the end of a study that has attempted to delineate a narrow band within a bewilderingly wide subject area. Nevertheless, here are a few attempts.

In *New Moon at Batoche*, the historian George Melnyk has quite rightly observed that, strangely, the popular prairie mythos is constructed of almost entirely agrarian images, even though the majority of the population is urban, and those urban centres on the prairies are as old as agricultural settlement itself. He cites a coffee-table book by Courtney Milne as the perfect example of how prairie cities are largely ignored. While the title of Milne's book of photographs is *Prairie Dreams*, and the book jacket promises "diversity," its images are strictly agrarian. Melnyk, in an effort to redress the balance between rural and urban representation, calls for a new understanding of prairie cities:

The land cannot be the sole arbiter of our identity, just as the farmer can no longer be the core of its mythology. We have been obsessed with the land and its meaning for us for over a century. Perhaps it is time to reflect on the cities we have built and seek to understand how our identity is expressed through them. (100)

Alison Calder, too, laments the overwhelmingly rural identity that represents the prairie in such books as Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning*, and Dave Bouchard's *Prairie Born* and *If you're not from the prairie*. . . . Her argument is that these books with their narrow focus construct "nostalgic and exclusive representations of the prairies" (98) that are limited and, indeed, disturbing.

These contentions are similar to those of Gerald Friesen, who would like to see us "leave behind the imagined prairie region" ("Defining" 26) in favor of a new way of identifying ourselves that would fit better with our economic and cultural realities. He hastens to say that such a position "is not an attack on the old prairie stories. All Canadians can enjoy *Jake and the Kid*. But it is important to remember that nostalgia is just that, nostalgia--a sentimental evocation of some period of the past" ("Defining" 25).

The preponderance of popular prairie images that are agrarian does seem somewhat odd in 2001 when most of us live quite urban lives. There may be a number of possible reasons for the continual reconstruction of our residual culture. Perhaps we construct ourselves as agrarian, not despite being urban, but because we are urban (and only recently so in the scheme of human evolution)? Perhaps we construct ourselves as honest rural folk because it is, at least, a more positive alternative to being thought simple bumpkins by those from outside the prairie?

I, too, would like to see popular images of the prairie that are more enigmatic. I would also like to see imaginings of urban landscapes beside those of rural ones in prairie portraits. But I am also bothered by what people might superficially take from arguments like those of Melnyk, Calder, and Friesen, that all representations of agrarianism are disingenuous or cliched. On the contrary, I would suggest that if people cannot find complex, ambiguous and imaginative agrarian writings, then they are not looking very hard.

The agricultural myth that I have traced through a series of texts in this thesis might offer another possible approach to such valid issues as those raised by Melnyk, Calder, and Friesen. The texts that I have examined are all rich evocations of an agricultural myth. Consider the farmers we have seen who are pitiable and driven, monstrous and egotistical, committed and energetic; farmers who are subdued by land, farmers who subjugate land, and farmers who are caring nurturers of land; farmers who have a vision, farmers who descend into madness, farmers who form cooperatives, farmers who die tragically; comic farmers, dedicated farmers, unscrupulous farmers, and hopeless farmers. The agricultural myth in all its facets--the farmer figure, his contradictory role with regards to nature, the changing face of agriculture itself in an industrial age, and the agrarian sites where these elements coalesce--all of these facets serve a complex representation of nature and urban sensibilities coming

together at the threshold of the farm. Melnyk's division of rural and urban is perhaps not just a statement of the problem, but part of the problem itself. It may be more felicitous to think about rural and urban landscapes as representations coming from a similar cultural urge, the need to connect with nonhuman aspects of our world.

The farm as a concept then is like an arena wherein we can see the working out of a larger society, not simply rural, but urban as well. Cultivation, the fostering of growth in crops *and* the refinement of intellectual and artistic taste, could be the key to thinking about rural and urban as related worlds. Consider "Cornet at Night," in which Tom changes out of his farm clothes to practise the piano in the hot plushy parlour, or the boy in "The Outlaw" who gets a lesson in artistic impressionism from his beautiful but dangerous horse, Isabel. In "Seed Catalogue," cultivation is the overt key to both imagining the land and conceiving of any artistic endeavor. How do you grow a poet, indeed? In *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Brian may go on to cultivate the science of "doctoring" and the earthiness of "dirt." *Paper Wheat*, too, cultivates explicitly artistic forms (dance, mime, and song) to tell the story of the farm. Cultivation, in its many namings, is a way of reimagining the agrarian space as, simultaneously, both an intellectual and a physical place.

The agrarian world may be narrower now than it has been historically, but is still wider than my own study of a few literary texts

could possibly suggest. My hope is that this dissertation might be the impetus for many more projects on agriculture, and the people who are involved in it (which is to say, all of us, if only, insofar, as we all eat--this is *not* an incidental point). One area of interest might be popular readings of agrarianism. What of cowboy poetry? What of the phenomenon of the dude ranch? What of the overwhelming popularity of gardening? What of the success of reality television's recent program, *Pioneer Quest*? What was it about the trials of two contemporary couples recreating a late nineteenth-century pioneering life in Manitoba that glued people to their televisions?

Another area of interest might be extra-literary readings of the farm. What of coffee-table books that feature, say, the architectural characteristics of barns? What of country craft magazines? What of *Harrowsmith*? What of books on food production that debate, for instance, the merits of genetically-modified organisms?

These examples, I would argue, are not about somebody else, but of us all here on the prairies at some level of experience and imagination. Further examination of the changing reality of an agricultural myth might help us to avoid the fatal division of the real and the imagined in our society.

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