

IMAGINE THE PRAIRIES. THE GARDEN
IN POST-DEPRESSION PRAIRIE FICTION

BY

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
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**IMAGINE THE PRAIRIES. THE GARDEN
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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree**

Of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation opens the question of the literary construction of the Canadian prairies as garden as it appears in representative twentieth-century post-depression prairie fiction. My thesis derives from the observation that the particular time period of the depression has generated an impression of the Canadian prairies predicated on an indifferent if not malevolently aggressive environment during "the dirty thirties" despite the noticeable ambiguity in descriptions of both prairie space and the characters who inhabit that space. My approach defines the prairie garden's connection to the Garden of Eden and other mythical gardens.

In this document I trace the beginnings of the construction of the prairies as garden through the literary traditions beginning with Homer (c. 850 BCE), through Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. I find its continuance in the early eighteenth-century in the writing of Henry Kelsey (1690); in nineteenth-century settlement literature of Canada; and in the mid-twentieth-century writing I am concentrating on - works by Sinclair Ross, Wallace Stegner, Margaret Laurence, W.O. Mitchell, and Robert Kroetsch. The books I examine construct the prairie as wilderness and as blighted garden, but also as a place of productivity and hope. Critics have come to understand prairie as a place where, as Northrop Frye argues in *The Bush Garden*, there can be no Wordsworthian unity of individual mind and nature. Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* dreams a veritable

prairie Eden, in the wake of Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, and Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. In each of the novels, alongside the blight caused by largely by drought, there is fertility and even at times, abundance.

The gardens in the books I examine are varied: in *As For Me and My House* and *The Stone Angel*, the treatment is largely one of sensibility and imagination. Abundance and fertility, both attributes of the Garden of Eden, exist less in physical space than in emotion and imagination in the central characters of Ross and Laurence. In *Wolf Willow*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and *The Words of my Roaring*, the gardens are no less imagined: in addition to sites of hope, they are also sites of creation, recreation and reinvention, and recovery.

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Imagine the Prairies: The Garden
in Post-Depression Prairie Fiction

*All gardens are to some degree recreations of the Garden
of Eden.* Roger Evans

How / do you grow a prairie garden? Robert Kroetsch

"The notion of place," Deborah Keahey writes in *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature*, "has long played a central role in discussions of Prairie literature" (4). Keahey goes on to say that "place has overwhelmingly been defined in narrow, deterministic terms, as 'the land' or the natural physical environment (4). Place has also overwhelmingly been described in terms of the myth that grew out of what Roy Daniells calls a "grim period, lengthened against all experience and expectation" (ix)—a period of "drought and . . . depression, the long succession of years between the two wars when the farmer and all who served or depended upon him found everything against them" (ix). There has consequently been, and there remains in prairie writing, an overwriting of the prairie place as bleak, arid, sterile, and deterministic.

My project is to look at how this view of the prairies is not sufficient. I argue that the idea of the garden has always played a role in the literary construction of prairie place, but that it has been overlooked. Even books commonly understood to portray the notion of the prairies as arid and inhospitable provide evidence of the garden—as do the books I examine in this dissertation:

The image of the prairie as "the land" needs to be re-examined, and one way to do this is to consider prairie space as garden-like rather than as a *tabula rasa* of agricultural production. Although the image of the garden has been "planted" forthrightly and implicitly in the literary construction of the prairie, to date there has been no sustained critical discussion of the prairie place as garden. The notion of the garden is a matter of literary convention. Viewing the prairie as garden, then, creates for prairie writing a literary tradition that has a place in the classical tradition of writing the garden that has occurred at least from the time of Homer, c.850 BCE.

In a reading of the construction of prairie place as garden, it is instructive to trace the construction of the literary garden to its roots. Carolyn Merchant points out in *Reinventing Eden* that the garden has been ingrained in Western literary tradition in the form of variants of the Garden of Eden story from The Book of Genesis. The Garden of Eden, Merchant observes, "has shaped Western culture from earliest times, and the [North] American world since the 1600s," (2). As Merchant points out:

The Garden of Eden story is perhaps the most important mythology humans have developed to make sense of their relationship to the earth. Internalized by Europeans and Americans alike since the seventeenth century, this story has propelled countless efforts by humans to recover Eden by turning wilderness into garden . . . (2).

Transforming wilderness into the garden succinctly describes the fundamental project in the settlement narrative of the Canadian prairie West that first begins in European imagination of a New World, and continues with the arrival of the Europeans on the prairies at the turn of the Seventeenth Century.

In prairie writing the notion of the garden repeatedly demonstrates its connection to its ancestral garden narrative that marks the beginning of the inscription of Christian thought. A brief summary of the literary lineage of the garden helps to locate the prairie garden, and hence, prairie writing, in the larger Western literary tradition. Ernst Robert Curtius explains that it was from Homer that later generations derived motifs that became attributes of the traditional literary garden, among them, the characteristic place of the heart's desire, a perpetual spring, "a miniature landscape. . . [and] a carpet of flowers" (186). "In the hymns to the gods ascribed to Homer," Curtius writes, "we find these motifs elaborated" (186). Curtius goes on to remark on the flowery mead of the Hymn to Demeter and its specifically named flowers: "roses, violets, irises, crocuses, hyacinths, and narcissus" (186). In prairie writing almost three millennia later, readers find the continuance of the notions of nature and the divine in a common setting—the prairie garden. In Kroetsch's dream-like garden in *The Words of My Roaring*, for example, readers find symbolic representations of the attributes of Homer's gardens—replete with water, trees, birdsong, and an abundance of

flowers—even on the relatively treeless, drought-stricken Canadian prairie of the 1930s.

Curtius finds Homer's concern with Nature and the beginnings of pastoral poetry in the work of Theocritus of Syracuse, after which the pastoral enters into Christian tradition by means of the nativity narrative. According to Curtius, the path of the pastoral continues on into the Renaissance to become "a part of the Western tradition" (190)—essentially via Virgil.¹

Like Curtius, Carolyn Merchant also finds the merging of Biblical and Virgilian allegories in the Middle Ages.² The allegories mix and mingle in the twentieth century prairie writing as well. For example, in Kroetsch's Eden-like garden of the prairie, Helen Persephone, representative of the underworld of Greek and Roman myth, offers Johnnie Backstrom a version of restorative salvation. Kroetsch's garden demonstrates the claim of paradise on the writerly imagination.

In *Milton's Earthly Paradise. A Historical Study of Eden* (3), Joseph E. Duncan claims that the earthly paradise, "so variously interpreted from primitive myth to modern psychology, is at the heart of much of the thought and literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (3). According to Duncan, the ideas of earthly paradise employed by writers such as Milton and his

¹ See Curtius for a sustained discussion of the characteristic attributes of "schools and works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (viii) with which he is concerned.

² For reference to merging narratives see Curtius (187) and Merchant (47-48).

contemporaries reflect "centuries of acceptance, rejection, and interpretation of earlier myth, theology, and literature" (3). Like Curtius and Duncan, Robert Chambers and A. Bartlett Giametti also trace the pastoral tradition and particularly the writing of the garden to Milton by way of Virgil.

The works of Curtius, Duncan, and Merchant, among many others, testifies to the strength of the hold the Garden of Eden narrative has had on the European imagination throughout literary history. The lineage these writers establish prepares the ground for an examination of the writing of the garden in the geographic region of North America we now know as Canada. The constructions of place in the writing of Henry Kelsey and explorers and surveyors such as Captain John Palliser, Henry Youle Hind, Hubert Humphrey Hime, John Macoun and Captain William Butler, among others, provide some links to the European tradition of imagining the garden in North America in the late-eighteenth century, the point at which European exploration of the prairies begins.

Kelsey's journal of 1790 provides one of the first North American links to the European imagining of the garden in the Canadian North West. Imagination and the role it plays in the creation of place as garden rests at the center of the pre-settlement explorers' and surveyors' responses to the Canadian Northwest. The early explorers, who were among the first Europeans to have seen the western interior and who considered themselves alone in the "new" space, were by no means the first people to journey inland. They traveled in the company of

Aboriginal guides whose presence, although noted in archival expedition notes and published documents, is generally set aside along with other details of the explorations not then considered relevant to the purpose of the expedition. It is crucial to our understanding of explorers' responses to the "new" place, however, to remember that culturally, at least, the explorers felt or saw themselves as essentially alone—a sensibility inscribed in part by being separated from family and friends—indeed, from the physical and social environments of home, and from literally everything familiar to them, including shelter, food and communication.

The explorers imagined themselves alone on the prairie and projected that sense of aloneness onto the land in the imaginative act of writing. Henry Kelsey reflects, for example, that he "was alone & no friend could find" (1), when he first ventured into what became known as the prairie. Separated from his guides culturally and linguistically, in a manner of speaking, he was alone. The title of Captain William Butler's book, *The Great Lone Land*, derives from a phrase within the text wherein he remarks on both solitude and loneliness. Butler offers only one example of the projection of feelings onto the land that appears in myriad non-fiction and creative documents alike on the Canadian prairie place across three centuries. Projection notwithstanding, explorers might be seen as relatively modern-day Adams, who, in encountering a place that was new to them, performed acts of naming evocative of the first men in the Garden of Eden. In addition to Kelsey and

Butler, explorers and surveyors kept records as required of them by their employers: they collected data, made lists, and named in their own language subjects of pre-determined and designated concern to them in their new environment. In collecting and recording data, their imaginings and interpretations of the prairie landscape place gave rise to ambiguous depictions of place that commonly evoke both garden and barren wilderness. For example, Palliser, whose work in the prairies took place in a time of drought, and Macoun, who worked there in years of abundant rainfall, understandably returned conflicting reports about the potential productivity of the prairie landscape. For these men, geography, climate, and environment all combined with the experience of being there to construct an imaginative vision of what could or could not be in the prairie place.

To Kelsey's eyes, the landscape is entirely new: in describing it, he writes of what he sees in terms of home. He records his impression of the new place according to his experience of other, specifically English, landscape. Kelsey, in his first reference to the prairie land, notes that the ground "begins to grow ~~barren~~ healthy and barren in fields of about / half a mile over just as if they [sic] had been Artificially made with fine groves of Poplo growing around y^m . . ." (7). Kelsey here engages in an act of an imagination that has had the experience of other cultivated space. Readers imagine the natural space described in the journal in a relatively similar way, the poplar groves evoking the image of a groomed park within a space

of particular shape and dimension—in other words as an artificial space, but equally importantly, not as an infertile place.

Brief as Kelsey's observation may be, and easy as it is to miss (or dismiss) it altogether in the journal, his imagining the prairie in terms of the garden has been repeated in cultural constructions of the Northwest well into the twentieth century. That Kelsey found the fields garden-like is evident in his comment that they appeared to have "been Artificially / made with fine groves of Poplo growing around yⁿ . . ." (7). The description could as easily be referring to a cultivated garden space in England. That the description was part of his journal at all attests to the impact on him of the garden-like, artificial space suggested by the "groves of fine Poplo . . ." (7).

As Kelsey's journals demonstrate, from the outset of European experience of the prairies, part of the imagining of prairie place has been of the prairie as garden according to the understanding of garden acquired elsewhere (that is, from first-hand experience of gardens and / or written accounts constructing the garden in literature and art). To imagine garden is to come to terms with, to contain, or even control new and seemingly limitless space. Whereas the explorers and surveyors responded to the prairies in their field notes and journals, the settlers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries broke the ground, planted seeds, and, within the confines of the surveyor's section lines, began to garden for domestic, aesthetic, and

commercial purposes.³ How crucially important, then, it must have seemed to newcomers expecting to make prairie place home, that they delimit and bring within the confines of their imaginations the huge space from which they were estranged because of its uncontainable, overwhelming, if not *un-imaginable* vastness. As geographer Ronald Rees observes, "migration is an emotional odyssey as well as a physical one . . ." (155). Newcomers' imaginings of the new place reside in recognition of and longing for the familiar. Imagining space as a garden fills many needs. The garden would have had the potential to provide both physical and emotional sustenance as it lent order to the settlers' lives through seasonal activity and as it allowed the replication of at least some of the rhythms and physical patterns of the home left behind. Ronald Rees comments that "preserving the patterns and traditions of the old world . . . reassured the settlers of the continuity of cultural ties" (34). As Rees demonstrates, the image of the garden as paradise had the potential to provide at least temporary emotional respite from exile—if only in imagination of the past or the future.

Isabella Valency Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie: A Love Story" provides one example early Canadian Long poem tradition of imagining the Canadian landscape as garden. I cite "Malcolm's Katie" in part because it is clearly a garden poem, and in part

³The concern of this discussion resides in the construction of the garden in literary imagination. Other literary criticism as well as work in other disciplines—such as economics and history, for example—address domestic and commercial land use variously. For example, see: Gerald Friesen, Douglas R. Francis, Don Gayton, Doug O'ram, Barry Potyondi, Ronald Rees, Robert Thacker.

because of its possible connection to the prairies.⁴ A significant part of the continuum of the construction of the garden in Canadian literature, nineteenth-century long poems are perhaps less well-known than the writing of several members of the Strickland family. Early prose texts by Susanna Moodie, her husband, J.W.D. Moodie, her brother Samuel Strickland, and her sister, Catharine Parr Trail demonstrate parallel concerns in prose.⁵

Viewing the prairie as a garden derivative of the Edenic garden casts light on the nature of the relationship between people and the prairie space they inhabit. I argue that as the traditional narrative of the creation of the Garden of Eden and the first human beings provides a story of creation in a particular place, so does the narrative of the Eden-like prairie garden offer a creation story pertinent to another particular place, a place from which new narratives enter into dialogue with

⁴According to D.M.R. Bentley, the debts of "Malcolm's Katie" to travel writers such as W.F. Butler and J.C. Hamilton "point to western Ontario, or more likely Manitoba as the setting of Max's homestead" (508).

⁵In *Life in the Clearings*, for example, Moodie recalls her first impression of land that "looks like a perfect paradise" (26) and "like a second Eden just emerged from the waters of chaos" (26). Traill shares some of Moodie's sentiment in this instance, when she comments that "Canada is the land of hope; here everything is new . . . (187)⁵. Edward H. Dahl comments on the frequency of the appearance of the imagined garden and paradise in the Moodies's, Strickland's and Traill's accounts of life in the settlement. Strickland, for example, writes of the possibility of parts of Upper Canada being transformed "into a Garden of Eden" (Vol.1, 65). In another instance of paradise similarly realized through the use of idealized nature, Alexander McLaughlin's pastoral "Talbot Road" places the newly established settler / farmer in "the little Eden he calls his own" (617).

the larger, established narrative tradition. Prairie writing demonstrates a concern with the prairie condition in relation to naturalization and amicable co-existence between the prairie garden and those who live within that garden.

The particular books I am interested in each contribute to an enduring "myth" of the Canadian prairies—a myth that was in the making during the time period of Great Depression, but that emerged in the aftermath of it, during the post-Depression years. I have limited my study to work produced by writers who were born or spent their formative years on the prairies during "the dirty thirties." The myth of The Great Depression continues to influence representation of the prairies as a blighted region: essentially, a failed garden. However dominant the narrative of privation might be, though, the ambiguity in the garden as it exists in Robert Kroetsch's quintessential prairie long poem *Seed Catalogue* best describes the prairie condition. The garden in *Seed Catalogue* is at once the site of hope and despair: "the seed catalogue bloomed / a winter proposition, if / spring should come, then" (13). For the poem's narrator, the seed catalogue represents the possibility of a garden in full bloom. The words "if," (13) and "should" (13) undermine the narrator's hope with the despair derived of the uncertainty that spring will come at all.

Seed Catalogue locates father, mother, and home in an imagined Canadian Garden of Eden comprised—as was the garden in Genesis—of ambiguous promise. Kroetsch predicates the question of how to grow not only the garden, but also the gardener on a cyclical series of

questions concerning the prairie place: "how do you grow . . ." he asks repeatedly: a gardener, a lover, a prairie town, a past a prairie town a poet, a prairie town, a garden. Consider the perception in *Seed Catalogue* of agricultural space as garden: "My father," the narrator writes, "was puzzled / by any garden that was smaller than a "section of wheat and summerfallow" (15). In the father's imagination, the quarter-section of wheat and summerfallow is a garden, and implicit in the father's bewilderment is the narrator's own understanding of the prairie being a garden as well. Whereas the father clearly knows what to do with the expansive garden place, the narrator is caught in the prairie garden's ambiguity from the outset: "it was spring," he recalls, "Or, no; / then winter was ending" (13). What appears either to be a self-correction, a mis-remembering, or an inaccuracy, in fact has to do with cultural expectation, and naming. Was it spring, or was it the end of winter? Kroetsch's narrator's allusion to seasonal ambiguity bears on prairie gardeners who have adapted their gardening practices according to the seasons of the prairie place without changing their naming. The point here is that Kroetsch's narrator demonstrates from the beginning of the poem his awareness of imagination and cultural inscription and the role it plays in determining the notions of place.

Given the myths of the "new" world informed by Western tradition, the connection of prairie to Eden is inevitable. Writers, farmers, surveyors, film-makers, photographers, and painters, among others, have tended to imagine the prairies through

often inseparable Edenic and post-Edenic narratives. They have viewed the landscape as the agent of hardship on the one hand, and the author of good fortune on the other. As it is with the overarching Edenic narrative, so it is with the prairie garden: both comprise the ambiguous potentials of fertility and failure.

John Fleming reminds his readers in *Roman de la Rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconicity*, that the image of the garden in literature has long presented an image of paradise for which people could yearn. Historians of Christianity, he continues, "tell us that medieval man longed for paradise as the exile longs for the homeland. They filled their world with images of the paradise for which they yearned . . ." (56). Exile is a human condition that crosses time and place. Fleming's use of the word obtains not only for the spiritual reading of Christians in exile from God, but for individuals who are exiles in various other ways. To Fleming's mention of pilgrims, wanderers, and seafarers, one might add Adam and Eve and myriad mythological characters. A list would extend to the people in the Canadian prairie West in the depression years—first generation settlers and homesteaders (and in Alberta, ranchers)—who were, in effect, not only physically and emotionally exiled from a distant homeland, but from their adopted homeland as well. The settlement history of the prairies reveals that the settlers refigured home by degree as they adapted to the new culture on the prairies and adjusted to the conditions imposed by the physical environment.

Gardening represents efforts to refigure home and adjust to regional conditions. For the settlers, gardening was also perhaps the most immediately satisfying of their efforts to refigure home, because gardens could be replicated as long as seed could be sown and harvested. A garden with small straight rows neatly planted, even if it produces nothing in the end, has involved the gardeners in the age-old rituals of imaginatively and literally putting down roots and, at the same time, it has immediately (and concretely) assisted the newcomers in adapting to the new place. By means of their imaginative and physical interaction with the land, the preparation of the garden alone marked the beginning of new relationships between settlers and place, predicated on adaptation and naturalization. In his introduction to Robert Gard's *Johnnie Chinook: Tall Tales and True from the Canadian West*, Donald Cameron observes that regardless of where newcomers came from, they learned that if they were going to conquer the elements on the western plains they would have to adapt themselves to the conditions they found, and not try to mould the western plains into a replica of an eastern or older world pattern.

The garden was instrumental in initiating and representing newcomers' adaptation; moreover, out of the awareness of the attributes of their new environment arose what Cameron calls "a distinct western spirit, an optimism that is at once hopeful and fearful, and a sense of humour which is the source of many . . . tales" (xvii). That spirit, I argue, has a great deal to do with

visions of the garden and visions of home, in garden "tales" such as appear in Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue* or *The Words of My Roaring*, as well as in novels such as Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*, and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. In traditional prairie writing and literary criticism, the garden (almost exclusively referred to as "the land") has been notably conspicuous for its failure. As a result of this inscription of failure, the prairie garden as a place of Eden-like possibility, *per se*, has been overlooked. The garden narrative is not similarly absent from the literature of American prairie space. An extension of a larger American narrative that began with Thomas Jefferson has long been applied both creatively and critically to the literature of the American great plains.⁶

The notion of the garden has considerably more prominence in American Literature and critical response to it than the notion of the garden has in Canadian Literature and critical writing about it in general. Critics such as Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith observe that in American Literature, the notion of the garden is often predicated on the romance and excitement of a natural, new world. The myth of the garden that informed and helped to imaginatively construct America since its discovery has not held the same significance in Canada, in part because the myth was not promoted as part of a plan to settle the western region. In *Unnamed Country*, a book that contains one of the few lengthy critical discussions on the garden in Canadian

⁶ For an extended analysis of the Edenic American dream, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*.

Literature, Dick Harrison focuses on nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Canadian prairie texts. Harrison writes:

From the turn of the century to the mid-1920s the best known writers, including [Ralph] Connor, Nellie McClung, R.J.C. Stead, and Arthur Stringer were all presenting the West in terms of the garden awaiting cultivation. This garden motif in their description is reminiscent of 'the Garden of the World' myth attached to the American plains, and probably grew out of it. (72)

The garden was not only awaiting cultivation, but was also predisposed to it, in a manner of speaking. Margaret Atwood, for one, points out in *Survival* that unlike the American west, Canada's west was never particularly "wild," because "the rules of the game are already set up" (121), or, in other words, the "law is there first because the universe is conceived as being already under its sway" (121).⁷ Atwood's claim is similar to Northrop Frye's claim:

It has often been remarked that Canadian expansion westward had a tight grip of authority over it that American expansion, with its outlaws, sheriffs, and vigilantes and the like did not have. (226)

Indeed, as part of their search for a Canadian literature, critics such as Margaret Atwood and Dick Harrison have tended to use the creative treatment of the prairies north and south of the

⁷ See Atwood (120-124) and Harrison (72-99).

border-influenced by notions of the "new" land as Eden or not—to demonstrate difference between the Canadian and American Wests.

Harrison demonstrates that the Wests are split imaginatively by the forty-ninth parallel; by visions of place assigned to them far in advance of their "discovery" and exploration largely by English, French, and Spanish Europeans; and by the political culture (and policies) dictated by physically and philosophically far-removed national administrations in Ottawa and Washington. In terms of Canadian prairie literary criticism the Wests are divided further by narratives that inscribe them as Edenic, on one side of the border, and certainly less Edenic on the other.

Another split in the narrative of American plains and Canadian prairie, predicated on the understanding of the Interior as garden, derives from the 1930s and the catastrophic drought that contributed to the imaginative construction of the part of the prairie region—the Palliser Triangle, which Tommy Douglas locates "mainly [in] southern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta and a very small part of Manitoba" (163). Douglas comments that the 1930s brought to the Canadian prairies double misfortune in the form of:

. . . economic depression which had struck the industrialized western world and the special effects of the dustbowl which had started in the United States and spread slowly northward" (163).

The split in the narratives between two similarly affected regions comes in part as the result of initiatives undertaken by the American government that jointly addressed drought and the unemployment of the Great Depression—for example, the building of the Fort Peck Dam in Montana. Whereas on the American side of the forty-ninth parallel, people were working, Douglas remarks that

On the Canadian side of the border nobody was doing anything. The farmers were playing horseshoes, the unemployed were hanging around, the young people were riding the rods [rails] . . . (169).

Historical work patterns and attempts to solve employment crises which the Depression brought on belong more to the province of politics and labour than literary criticism, but the 1930s blossomed into myth as the result of both historical and literary accounts of that period. The stories of people walking away, as Douglas puts it, "from a lifetime of work and a whole lifetime of hopes and dreams unrealized . . . to start all over again" (169), help to inform the myth that bears a relationship to the garden myth in terms of recovery, restoration, and reinvention.

Dick Harrison, on the other hand, in examining many of the same early prairie novels that Ricou considers, finds in prairie writing a tradition of envisioning prairie place as garden—to a point. Harrison observes, moreover, that the Edenic garden "seems to be one of the poles of the prairie imagination" (99), and he goes on to say that the garden myth was amenable to early prairie

writing and art perhaps because of its use in assisting individuals to see the land. His point is that only after the land could be seen "*in relation to man*" (Harrison's emphasis, 98) could it "take on meaningful shape and acquire significant detail" (98).⁸ Harrison points out that there were also disadvantages to the garden myth in that, as "an imaginative conception of the prairie life" (95), it obscured the fact that people in a new place had to exist in accordance with the dictates of the new environment (94-97).

Harrison's comments nonetheless affirm the myth of the garden as "an underlying assumption in the popular tradition of prairie writing" (99). I propose that this underlying assumption largely informs particular works of prairie writers I am concentrating on—Sinclair Ross, Margaret Laurence, W.O. Mitchell, Wallace Stegner, and Robert Kreetsch. Rather than being a phase at any point, I see the myth of the Garden of Eden as an integral part of English language writers' "imaginative perception of prairie life" (Harrison, 99) from the beginning.

The relatively small body of literary criticism dedicated to prairie literature has evolved generally from notions predicated on environmental determinism. Deborah Keahey sums up that determination as "individuals in conflict with nature" (4)⁹.

⁸ Harrison here draws on such writers as Robert Stead, F.P. Grove, Ralph Connor, Arthur Stringer, and Nellie McClung (among others).

⁹ Environmental determinism might otherwise be defined as a "realist" approach to constructing the literary prairie landscape, as demonstrated in major statements on prairie writing by Edward McCourt, Henry Kreisel, Laurence Ricou, and Dick

According to Geographer Ken Atkinson, environmental determinism would "support the view that the lives and methods of prairie dwellers were determined by the stark flatness and homogeneity of the landscape, the brutal winter, and the silences of isolation" (232). In concurrence with Eli Mandel, Atkinson goes on to say that the economic and social geography of the prairies has to do with the mental image of that landscape, "behind which lie the material and intellectual goals, prejudices, dreams and illusions of individuals" (232). In short, to quote Mandel, "far from being a determinism, an environment may be a human creation" (CC, 9). For Mandel, "the determining pattern in prairie writing is literary" (AT, 1). The ideal repository of dreams and illusions is the notion of the garden. All gardens—especially the prairie garden that was approached as "new" and hitherto unused space open to possibility—are constructs of human imagination. Gardens are repositories of hope and dream.

Don Gayton claims in *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* that the prairie is also "a construct of imagination, an idea of place, one coveted by immigrants and botanists. A destroyer of painters and spawner of writers" (7). These observations comprise the underpinnings of my argument and this conclusion: the prairie can be seen as a garden. To support my thesis, I have considered the ways in which five books set in the prairie of the "dirty thirties" construct the prairie garden.

Harrison. See Keahey (5, 163), and Mandel, "Images of Prairie Man," *Another Time* (45-53).

These books that take as their common setting the devastating prairie drought of the 1930s, are deceptively similar. Close examination in the light of the ur-narrative of the Garden of Eden reveals significant differences between them. The differences reside in the individual writers' treatment of specific attributes of the garden, primarily the notions of imagination, ambiguity, and promise. These notions, in particular, are essential to the understanding of the prairie as garden.

The prairie garden represents a place of possibility for dreamers. Like the Garden of Eden, it also represents hope and houses temptation. The application of these notions to the prairie affirms the understanding of the prairie named as "garden"—as opposed to "the land," the name by which it has been widely constructed prairie writing—as it affirms the larger connection between the prairie garden and the ur-garden of its traditional literary lineage.

Robert Kroetsch, in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, addresses the "possibility of the garden" (79) that exists when things are rooted therein, literally and metaphorically. The possibility implied in notions of being rooted bear on the relationship between the land and what or who is on it or in it. People work on the land, but they work in the garden. To be "on" implies separation, or "detachment from" (OED); to be "in" implies enclosure, belonging to, "attachment to" (OED). To be on the land is to be not-rooted to it; to put down roots is to

change the relationship from being *on*, and therefore apart from, to being *in*, and, therefore, a part of. The garden is the site where the characters physically attempt to put down roots in the place they are making home, and the notion of garden represents their "rootedness,"¹⁰ as opposed to the notion of "the land," which does not.

For prairie literary characters the attempts to put down roots might be more important than the outcome of those attempts, because to make the attempt to put down roots is to demonstrate faith in possibility of being rooted. The move toward rootedness is a move toward a lasting presence that, in turn, is a defense against insignificance if not erasure in the large open prairie place. Roots assert being in place. In *Seed Catalogue*, Robert Kroetsch addresses erasure and human inability to effectively delimit its (negative) possibility. In Kroetsch's poem, the garden represents the investment of belief in establishing one's presence.

Critics such as Dick Harrison theorize that early prairie writers, among them, F.P. Grove, Robert Stead, Martha Ostenso, and Nellie McClung, give expression to the prairies through their central characters' relationships with what they refer to as "the land."¹¹ The argument is paradoxical in that the settlers' problems with the land—the agricultural garden—derives from the nature of their relationship with the land, at least in part,

¹⁰ "Rootedness" is a term Keahey employs in her discussion that equates the land with place and home (5 ff).

¹¹cf. Harrison (98, 130, 184).

because they brought to it expectations governed by experience of other place. This is not a moral flaw, as seems almost to be implied in some critical work. The expectations were perhaps more a case of naïveté; or of understanding having been impeded by a simple lack of time to make the adjustments necessary for adaptation; or of misjudgment of the often deceptive similarity between old and new place. As settlers might have expected tasks of gardening, for instance, to be relatively similar in both places, they might not have anticipated the challenge of even preparing the new ground for planting. They might not have anticipated what Laurence Ricou describes as "forbidding land: (8), of "forbidding landscapes" (11), or "barren land" (39). Harrison, for his part, writes of spiritual "alienation form the land" (101, 130), and notes that "the prairie with its openness and isolation . . . makes its own peculiar assault on the civilized mind" (2).

Dick Harrison describes characters such as Ostenso's Caleb Gare, and Grove's Nils Lindstedt and Abe Spalding, pitting their will against nature in the rhetoric of combat. Consider the opening lines of Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* that Harrison uses to make his point: "'On the road leading north from the little prairie town of Minor two men were fighting their way through the gathering dusk'" (Grove 15; quoted in Harrison 115).¹² Two lines in Grove's *Fruits of the Earth* clearly establish the fact that

¹² Dick Harrison provides insightful historical and literary discussion on prairie writers as well as critical response to their work, to 1977.

Abe Spalding is not only pitted against nature, but is actively preparing the field for battle when he purposefully uses his horse-drawn plough to draw lines (furrows) in the virgin prairie soil. In *Fruits of the Earth*, the furrows amount to battle lines: "He [the settler] was here to conquer. Conquer he would!" (25). Frye's comment is illustrative: "The notion of conquest," he notes, "suggests something military, as it should—one thinks of General Braddock, preferring to have his army annihilated rather than fight the natural man on his own asymmetrical ground" (224).

In early nineteenth-century writing, descriptions of the settlers' efforts to survive are analogous to war. The discourse also finds employment in the generations of writers following writers such as F.P. Grove. For instance, Anne Marriott's long poem, "The Wind Our Enemy," foregrounds the notion of battle in its title. In Grove, the men fight their way through the dusk; in Marriott, the words "our enemy" evoke notions of combat; and in Ross, Mrs. Bentley fights the wind. Throughout the literature, characters work the land spend time on the land, do battle with the land; and speak of the land of . . . In comparison, they work in the field or in the garden. To be in the garden and to be planting is to be engaged, quite literally, in putting down roots.

All five of the writers of the books in focus—Sinclair Ross, W.O. Mitchell, Margaret Laurence, Wallace Stegner, and Robert Kroetsch—experienced devastating prairie drought and the outbreak of The Great War and / or World War II. They lived in and lived through the hope and imagining of a new world after

moving from cataclysm to cataclysm. In short, the vision of the new world that various gardens exemplify—in failure and fertility—is predicated on a new world emerging out of the destruction of the old one. The image of the garden is perhaps best described as one of indefatigable hope.

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941), and Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), book-end my discussion. *As For Me and My House* is the book closest in time to the Great Depression. It is also a book that appeared when the conflicts of World War II were still expanding. As a metaphoric match to an ethos of despair over a crumbling world order, Ross's undeniably bleak garden prepares the way for the prairie garden narratives that follow it. But even Ross's blighted garden has its moments of Eden. For example, it houses notions of sanctuary that derive from Mrs. Bentley's taking comfort in it. At the same time, it houses temptation in the form of the unrealized love affair between Mrs. Bentley and Paul. Abundance in the Ross garden surely resides in the hope that Mrs. Bentley demonstrates in caring for the garden she imagines, that takes form in the garden that she *knows* simply will not grow.

As Ross's small, failing, domestic garden symbolizes the persistence of hope in the face of despair, so Kroetsch's lush and ornamental prairie garden in an area also blighted by drought is similarly symbolic. Kroetsch builds hope in the blighted prairie garden by constructing an inner sanctum—a healthy garden within, and with it, the promise of healing re-birth. Kroetsch's

garden, however, right down to the characters who most notably enjoy it, is considerably more ambiguous than the garden in the Ross book. The image of The Doc's smaller lush prairie garden—a variation of idyllic medieval gardens of pleasure—demonstrates possibility in the prairie garden. Through the construction of the Eden-like prairie garden and the character who is re-born in that garden, Kroetsch gives definition and shape to the hope for a new world.

The notion of a caretaker for Kroetsch's prairie paradise is equally important in W.O. Mitchell's romantic and lyrical prairie garden that similarly owes its abundance and beauty to ancestral literary constructions of the Garden of Eden. Mitchell's garden also owes its view of the presence of humankind in his garden to Genesis 2 and the notion of stewardship as Carolyn Merchant explains it in *Reinventing Eden*.¹³ Mitchell constructs his prairie garden, in part, from story-tellers' reinvention of Eden through narratives that fit together and comprise a creation story suitable to the prairie place. The narratives are, in part, an admixture of the story-tellers' experiences in the prairie garden infused with details about the garden in its "natural" state. The narratives serve to construct the prairie garden through various acts of naming that replicate acts of naming plants and animals in the Garden of Eden. Mitchell's interest in revising the meta-narrative of the Garden of Eden, set in a part of the world radically geographically

¹³ See Merchant (24-25).

different from the prairies, demonstrates the unsuitability of the story of origin in the prairie place.

Margaret Laurence's prairie garden exists by dint of sensibility—the Manawaka cemetery garden provides a centre for the narrative so predominantly concerned with death. Laurence employs the ambiguity of the Garden of Eden in her prairie garden, raising characteristic issues of alienation, belonging, and naturalization. Another naming of the issues comprise the here / there dichotomy Atwood addresses in *Survival* (18, 120-126). Hagar's struggle in *The Stone Angel* might be summed up in the words "I / am not random," words ascribed to the pioneer of Atwood's poem, "The Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" (13-14, 191). On the one hand, flowers fight for space in the *hortus conclusus* of the "tended" Manawaka cemetery garden that, with its imported marble statuary, largely symbolizes the settlers' "there"—the "Europe" left behind—in their move to the "here" of Canada. On the other hand, flowers naturalize in the larger garden exemplified, in part, by the "untended" and failed Shipley place. The garden, symbolized by reference to flowers, derives from imagination in the form of the backward-gazing Hagar Shipley, whose life in the larger prairie garden centers so significantly on the cemetery garden within. The naturalized flowers in Laurence's narrative become symbolic of Hagar Shipley herself, who is a cultural transplant, in a manner of speaking. To put it another way, Hagar represents a blend of the domains of

"here" and "there" that she first notices as a young child in the Manawaka cemetery garden.

Wallace Stegner, in *Wolf Willow*, also seeks to locate and to fit into a new world, and more importantly to construct a story of origin for a new world. Stegner's version of the garden is informed largely by the meta-narrative of Manifest Destiny and by the understanding of the new world space (America) as the garden of the world. In *Wolf Willow*, Stegner casts himself as the Adamic figure, a "namer" who becomes storyteller. The acts of naming take us onto the ground of place and identity that Robert Kroetsch gestures toward in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* when he says, "in a sense we haven't got an identity until we have a story. The fiction makes us real" (30). For his part, in *Wolf Willow*, Stegner is saying much the same thing in creating the prairie by dint of giving it a story.

If history, memoir, and imagination come together to construct the prairie garden in *Wolf Willow*, dream and imagination come together in Robert Kroetsch's novel *The Words Of My Roaring* (1966). The book's central character, Johnnie Backstrom, an undertaker by trade, is also a politician caught up in his election campaign promise to bring rain to his drought-stricken constituency. But his confession of dabbling a little in gardening himself (as an undertaker he "plants" people as well) makes one of several overt and distinct connections between prairie and garden in this novel. He muses that things don't grow on the prairie by nature: they have to be planted and tended.

Despite the obvious differences between Kroetsch's life-affirming garden in *The Words of My Roaring* and Laurence's cemetery garden in *The Stone Angel*, Kroetsch's narrator's assertion that things have to be nurtured on the prairies holds for both of the novels. On the rare occasions that Hagar even mentions gardens, it is clear that their value to her is neither particularly emotional, as is the garden to Mrs. Bentley, nor economic, as it is to Stegner. For example, Hagar recalls that the potatoes which "grew so well on the river bottom land of the Shipley place . . . fetched no price to speak of in town" (56). Indeed, on the Shipley place that Hagar describes as "never lucky" (29), only the natural prairie is fecund:

"In the patch where I had grown radishes and carrots and leaf lettuce," she remarks, "only the grasshoppers grew, leaping and whirring in the bone-dry air" (169).

Her marigolds are a "dead loss," as well, she remarks, although she goes on to say that a "few wizened ones remained, small unexpected dabs of orange among the choking weeds, dry sheepfoot, and thistle" (169). The remaining marigolds have survived naturally by means of seeding themselves, in contrast to Hagar's having once cultivated them. In short, they have naturalized. Whereas Laurence's notion of naturalization represents the continuance of tradition in the natural prairie place prior to the arrival of the homesteaders, Kroetsch's figuration of the Canadian prairie West as the ambiguous garden constitutes a continuance of traditions evident in the writing of the garden in

Canadian literature—a tradition begun in the early Canadian long poems—and in the classical tradition of writing the garden throughout literary history.

In my understanding, a garden comprises culturally determined and imaginatively delineated space in which humans turn their attention and energies toward planting and nurturing that which grows therein. In the books I examine the garden is inflected with cultural meaning reflective of twentieth-century time and place. Ross's and Mitchell's concern with the ephemeral, for example, represents a surprisingly contemporary view of the "vanishing" prairie as those writers see it. W.O. Mitchell, in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and Ross, in the short story, "A Field of Wheat," provide startling images of the ephemeral. In Ross, for example, a single poppy is all that remains intact in the aftermath of a hailstorm that ruins a crop and kills the family dog. The garden addresses the need for an aesthetic detached from, but yet a part of, the prairie, even in its ambiguous distance from old world sensibilities. In Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring*, the Doc's garden is clearly there for aesthetic reasons related to imagination, dream, and the tradition of the literary past. In Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, the garden represents home to backward-gazing narrators who re-construct it from memory. Finally, for the characters of those books, as Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* demonstrates, a garden is necessarily a construct of imagination that augurs belonging, that augurs home.

Chapter One

The Garden: Investment of Hope in Sinclair Ross's
As For Me and My House

. . . the myth of the new world, the garden story.

Robert Kroetsch

It may seem inauspicious to turn to the Dirty Thirties, one time of severe drought, to search for the garden. But there, in the midst of the drought-stricken prairie of Sinclair Ross's novel *As For Me and My House*, is a parsonage garden that would seem to be as dry and unproductive as any garden-domestic or agricultural—in the region. Robert Kroetsch somewhat facetiously declares in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* that Ross's gardener with her ruined plot "must come close to being the most incompetent gardener in all of fiction" (77). Kroetsch's comment assumes utter failure in Mrs. Bentley's efforts to harbour a garden. In contrast, I would argue for the success of the lonely Mrs. Bentley's efforts—a success that rests at the imaginative level in the planning, the planting, and the nurturing of prospects. It is calamitous as an actual garden, but it is useful to the protagonist as a site of comfort and hope.

Mrs. Bentley's garden provides psychological sustenance that is more important to her than anything the garden might produce, even in the best of growing conditions. The garden offers the hope of staving off depression as it allows Mrs. Bentley an escape from the house and an opportunity to do *something* other than passively listen to the maddening wind

"creak the walls" (58). Even the least hospitable version of the garden she finds preferable to such an enervated state. "If there were even weeds," she comments, "I could at least then stay out for an hour or so, and still be rational" (85). The importance of the garden clearly reaches beyond its most obvious and most quotidian purpose—producing vegetables and flowers. Having the promise of the garden is more important than suffering the liability of its infertility.

The notion of the garden is considerably more accessible to the imagination than the idea of "the land" which has been so popularised and so exploited in Canadian prairie fiction. Close examination of the garden in prairie writing yields information about the naming of prairie place. The garden provides perhaps the most tangible and representative example of growth and struggle, hope, ambition, and disappointment on the prairies. Attributes of a bountiful Edenic garden are few in Ross's novel, and given the description of the tiny parsonage and shrivelled garden there seems little room for a claim that Mrs. Bentley's garden may be Eden-like, even to a degree. That being said, however, I propose that Mrs. Bentley's garden not only represents hope but also other salient attributes of the biblical garden—among them enclosure; the offer of sanctuary; a solitary woman; and temptation.

Hardly a "walled" garden in the manner medieval gardens of literary tradition, with neither stone wall nor hedge to surround it, Mrs. Bentley's garden offers neither privacy, nor inner sanctum. Indeed, Mrs. Bentley's garden is far from being a

private domain. The fence no more keeps out Mrs. Ellingson's chickens or El Greco, the Bentley's dog, or even the silty, wind-borne dust which covers the few seeds that do sprout. Neither does it keep out or provide protection from prying eyes or other intrusions—despite being doubly enclosed. The larger outer border derives from various buildings on its perimeter, within which rests the smaller fenced garden. The parsonage, which Mrs. Bentley finds "so diminutive" beside the church (18) and the out-buildings at the back of the lot (the woodshed, the privy, and the garage), form part of the garden wall that is completed by the church along one side of the Bentley's lot and Mrs. Ellingson's large hip-roofed house and some of her out-buildings on the far side.

Representative of repressed creativity, the church that towers "ominously" (8), black "against the darkness" (8) to the point of merging with it in a metaphoric disappearance. It is similarly colourless by day: "big, glum [and] grayish" (18), Mrs. Bentley writes. The church is to the Bentley's repressed creativity as the garden is to their thwarted, if not failed, fertility. Even in the light of day, the church casts the pall of darkness on the house and enshrouds the Bentley's metaphorically: "the light comes colourless all afternoon¹" (32), Mrs. Bentley writes. But at night, the light is no better. Like the shadows of the church outside the house, "as the light contracts," Mrs. Bentley writes, "the room becomes enormous, its shadows merging

¹Roy Daniells writes that "the pages of Ross's story are bleached by sun and wind, drained of colour and deprived of animation by struggle and poverty" (ix-x).

with the night and the rain." In an extended metaphor for the drought, even the lamp burns dry (37, 67, 114).² The mention of the lamp at night brings with it the reference to moths, nocturnal insects that might remind the reader of the vibrant creative world from which the Bentleys are so distanced. Mrs. Bentley writes of the moths drawn to the lamp that: "to them . . . light is just as fierce and compelling as the passions we live by" (148). The garden is the manifestation of passion lived out regardless of the outcome.

Vanguard of religious culture, the Church in Horizon and similar prairie towns is also a bastion against secular culture, or, for that matter any expression of creative freedom as it concerns the Bentleys. Similarly monochromatic and colourless in the drought, in the absence of fresh greenery or flowers (with the exception of the poppy), the garden struggles with its own disappearance in light of aridity and wind erosion. Philip and Mrs. Bentley both ultimately sacrifice their art, their emotional well-being, and even their financial stability before the Church that, for over a decade, has cast its baleful shadow across all sites of creativity—of which the garden is so dramatically symbolic. Whereas Philip, for example, cast aside the formal pursuit of art in favour of the ministry, Mrs. Bentley, in turn, set aside the formal pursuit of music to become a minister's wife. They do persist, however. Philip, in tense privacy,

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³ Mrs. Bentley's capitalization of the word church distinguishes between the physical building (church) and authority (Church). In this instance, "black against the darkness" (8) holds for both.

continues with his "genteel and amateurish" (44) attempts to draw, and, in guilt-stricken moments, Mrs. Bentley continues to play the piano "sedately" (18), and "quietly" (27). In *Horizon*, the Bentleys struggle with "physical and cultural conditions," as Roy Daniells puts it, "of a cruel and excessive kind" (vi).

In *Horizon*, as in the other prairie towns to which they've been posted, Mrs. Bentley practices gardening as she practices music—in the shadow of the Church. Her position as minister's wife governs expectations of what she should rightly play in church or anywhere else. For instance, when she plays for the Lawsons, members of Philip's Partridge Hill congregation, Mrs. Bentley plays "*Hymns with Variations*" as opposed to the standard classical piano repertoire she loves to practice when she is alone at home. That she sometimes practices so as not to be heard, and that Philip withdraws into his study in order to draw unseen, might be understood as puritans' deference to the Church in that she and Philip both pursue their "improper" art covertly and present to their public the false front of piety and devotion to the Church.

There is a measure of validity to Kroetsch's claim that Mrs. Bentley's is a failed garden. Be that as it may, the failure is not solely due to Mrs. Bentley's physical incompetence: it has emotional causes as well. The odds are against her from the start, as they are against every prairie gardener in the district and the Great Plains who is struggling to survive in 1934, the fifth consecutive year of drought. However, Mrs. Bentley also contends with physical and emotional drought. As critics of the

work have noted, environmental sterility finds its parallel in emotional aridity throughout the text. For instance, in "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," W.H. New comments:

The overall impression left by the book is certainly one of aridity: of dust and heat, the Depression on the prairies and the drought that went with it. And accompanying the unproductivity of the land is the dryness of the people.

(184)

Laurence Ricou similarly proposes that "Ross introduces the landscape as a metaphor for man's mind, his emotions, his soul perhaps . . ." (82).⁴

From the outset Mrs. Bentley's garden is marked by liability. Following her resolution, "I'm going to have a garden" (58), she acknowledges that her chances of success are slim, but she justifies her hope nonetheless. "The way the wind keeps on, and all the signs for drought, it isn't likely anything will grow," she writes, "but I'd rather be out in the wind and fighting it than in here listening to it creak the walls" (58). Moreover, as Mrs. Bentley argues, she and Philip will be better off if they give each other a little space now and again: "If I don't have the garden," she writes, "he's going to hate the sight of me" (58).

⁴Correspondence between Ross's Mrs. Bentley and the Canadian landscape has been further-documented (cf. Daniels, 13; Stephens, 175 ff.) Although the landscape and the garden are irrefutably linked, my concern is with the garden per se and its role in Ross's novel.

⁵cf. Harrison 98, 130, 184

⁶ Dick Harrison provides insightful historical and literary discussion on prairie writers as well as critical response to their work, to 1977.

Mrs. Bentley's resolve to have a garden is one thing, but actually getting it going and keeping it going is another. At the outset Mrs. Bentley has difficulty not only in getting help to dig the garden, but also to water it. Having to contend with the conflict between her own, her neighbours', and the parishioners' expectations about what is inappropriate for her to do gets in the way of Mrs. Bentley's aspirations. The practical neighbour, unmindful of Mrs. Bentley's aesthetic impulse, makes it clear that she simply should not have planted anything but potatoes in the garden in the first place. "The last preacher had some beans and peas like you," Mrs Ellingson tells her, "and he was so mad because my chickens scratched them out he wouldn't speak to me" (89). There is a hint of independence, humour, and evidence of quick dry wit in Mrs. Bentley's response: "I went on clearing away the dust from the radishes wondering what Steve was like with a slingshot" (89). But, with the arrival of the stray dog he brings home, she does not need Steve and his slingshot. Mrs. Bentley later recounts her satisfaction and her dismay when she writes that El Greco "faithfully . . . kept Mrs. Ellingson's chickens out of the garden all morning, and then this afternoon dug a bed for himself in the middle of my poppies. There are ten left and four nasturtiums" (109). El Greco's presence, which deters the chickens and augurs well for the success of the beans and peas, turns into a hazard on another front as it appreciably lowers the odds for the flowers.

Parishioners' expectations are of a different, yet no less unfavourable order from the neighbours'. 'Men's work,' they are

unequivocally certain, does not belong in the house or the garden. "I learned my lesson, one day," Mrs. Bentley recalls, when some parishioners "caught me in the woodshed making kindling of a packing box" (5). Community pressure explains her resolve to have Philip do the spadework, as she seeks to enlist him in the creation of the garden. "The proprieties permit the mistress of the parsonage to grow a garden, to sow, and weed, and water like a lady," she writes, "but hardly to put her foot to fork to spade" (59). The prospect of doing the digging herself—and thereby not acting "like a lady" (59)—brings to mind the earlier rebuke from an unidentified castigator that Mrs. Bentley suffered on Philip's behalf, "'Surely this isn't necessary, in your position in the community—and Mr. Bentley such a big, able-bodied man—'" (5).⁷ The division of labour—in begetting a garden—could hardly be more clearly identified or more emphatically enforced.

John Moss writes in "Mrs. Bentley and the Bicameral Mind," that "for Mrs. Bentley the garden is an emblem of gender" (44), not simply because of the division of tasks or her justifications for the garden in the first place, but because a "sort of plaintive desperation . . . recalls to her an earlier garden and its association with the child she lost" (144). Moss's conclusion is in line with other Ross critics who read the land (rather than the garden per se) as the echo of the Bentleys' failure to

⁷ John Moss foregrounds issues of gender in "Mrs. Bentley and the Bicameral Mind," Moss writes that "for Mrs. Bentley the garden is an emblem of gender" (44) because of the division of tasks and her justifications for the garden in the first place, and because a "sort of plaintive desperation that recalls to her an earlier garden and its association with the child she lost" (144).

sustain life as creative human beings, either biologically or artistically. Clearly the issue for the readers has been a matter of the couple's suffocation and slow death in a landscape comprised of failure in the "inner and outer" world (vi), to which Daniells refers in his much-quoted introduction to the 1957 reprint of *As For Me and My House*.

There is no escaping the narrative of failure in the drought-stricken prairie garden on any plane. Consider that in the course of Mrs. Bentley's narrative, the Bentleys have lost two children, one a stillborn infant, the other their erstwhile son, the "orphaned" Steve—as well as their horse and their dog. In reinforcement of that situation, the Lawsons lose their son and Judith dies. Everywhere crops fail; the prairie economy falls into ruination. Marriages besides the Bentleys' are coming apart at the seams so to speak because of wives' suspicions that *their* husbands fathered Judith's child.⁸ But, beleaguered and bewildered as the Bentleys may be in their emotional and physical landscapes, the trouble they are having sustaining life as creative human beings does not result in suffocation and slow death. They are, as Mrs. Bentley's journal and her garden indicate, creative survivors—not joyful by any means, but resourceful, nonetheless.

Philip's work in the garden—the only physical work he does in the course of Mrs. Bentley's narrative—is of benefit to both the minister and his wife for quite different reasons. Mrs.

⁸ Kroetsch, for one, notes the characteristic ambiguity of Mrs. Bentley's narrative and comments on questions of the child's paternity (25).

Bentley records her observation that after the strenuous work in the sun and wind, Philip "is more relaxed in his mind" (60). Working the garden evidently is in some measure recuperative for him. There is a more subtle benefit to his work, too. Although Mrs. Bentley herself perhaps does not even recognize it, her description of the obviously pleasurable experience of seeing Philip working outside in the garden signals her sexual responsiveness to him, and restores to her some sense of his attractiveness. "I kept watching him out the window today," she writes, "thinking how good it was to see the steady ply and rhythm of his body . . . the wind blow through his hair. . . ." (60). She continues extravagantly, "It makes me wish I had a garden for him every day" (60).

Mrs. Bentley does have the garden. Despite her enthusiasm, however, Philip neither helps, nor does she ask for his help with it. Having grown "ashamed" (98) for her dry "little yellow poppy and nasturtium leaves" (98), she carts pails of water, furtively, hoping not to be seen. But just as she got caught doing chopping kindling by a parishioner in another town, so she gets caught carrying water, and she suffers the humiliation of having another parishioner, Miss Twill, ask, "what my husband and son were doing" (98). Miss Twill's reproach serves to justify Mrs. Bentley's resolve that "Philip will have to do it [the digging] . . . even if I have to drive him to it playing the piano" (59). Mrs. Bentley responds in the self-address of a diary, presumably to reassure herself: "Philip doesn't understand the garden, and I hesitate to ask him (98). Her various anecdotes point out that

she is basically alone in her endeavour, even though Steve helps her by fetching water—if she pays him. Her lonely vigil is occasioned for fear of embarrassment over how much she invests in the garden's success:

That's the kind of garden it is. I don't want even Steve to know that *I still have hopes for it*. Yesterday when he found me poking to see if my beans were sprouted yet he looked down his nose incredulous and said, you should have seen the cabbages my father used to grow. (85, emphasis added)

Steve "looking down his nose" (85) at her garden provides one more insult, to be sure. But despite lack of support on any front, and despite fearing embarrassment over dashed hopes, Mrs. Bentley retains "hopes for it" (85), nevertheless. That investment of hope in the face of disappointment also serves as a testament to her independence and determination to forge for herself a place—a garden place—in which she feels she belongs.

The only bit of space which Mrs. Bentley can claim as her own—space that she can truly belong in—is the garden which provides a place in which she can impart something of herself, however slight the reward. The tiny and oppressive space she shares with Philip affords her little privacy. The house is no larger for Philip, but he at least he can close himself in and close the world out of his study when he withdraws into it, a situation upon which Warren Tallman provocatively comments. "The bleak assumption of this beautiful novel," Tallman writes, "is that Philip Bentley has no ground upon which he might stand"

(41). But Philip's lack of a place to stand is at least as physical as it is figurative. Philip retreats into his art, but he really demonstrates no more loyalty to it than to anything or anyone else. The dominant image of Philip is of him retreating into his study—"some thirty times," Tallman reports, "as he paints a picture of the Bentleys caught in concentric rings of despair" (40). The dominant image of Mrs. Bentley is of a woman similarly alone, writing and thinking, in the dim light of a lamp that is burning dry; walking alone in "wheeling and windy" (8) nights near the railroad tracks at the edge of town or working alone in the garden.

Neither Philip nor Mrs. Bentley can make a retreat that is particularly satisfying. Mrs. Bentley obtrudes on Philip's (physical) private space with impunity. For example, she brings others into his study to show off his drawings, much to his anger, and she searches through his drawers. She "lets" (5) him be the man about the house, for instance, and she prods him to be the man digging the garden. But Philip also encroaches on Mrs. Bentley's personal space. She is a musician whose playing he actively discourages just as he passively discourages her gardening by refusing to help her get it going or keep it going.

The issue of privacy weighs heavily on Philip and Mrs. Bentley both inside and outside the parsonage for their every move is open to public scrutiny, even—especially even—in Mrs. Bentley's cherished place—the garden. The fact that she has to carry water from a community well to maintain the garden makes her gardening more public than it would be, for instance, if she

had her own well (though wells commonly go dry in times of drought). Mrs. Bentley's report of the church board meeting concerning the Bentleys' erstwhile "son," Steve demonstrates the extent to which the Bentleys' privacy is compromised. "Someone," Mrs Bentley writes "had caught a glimpse of the crucifix above Steve's bed, and thumped on a pew, 'No popery'" (95). The incident that reveals the town's barely-contained sectarianism, however, rests on privacy-breached from within the garden. In this instance, "someone" (95) has looked closely enough into the parsonage to see the crucifix in Steve's makeshift bedroom behind the kitchen, where it is unlikely to have been within clear view either of a casual passer-by or a guest in the house. The Bentleys would have received their visitors in the living room, and those visitors would not be elsewhere in the house without specific purpose—such as looking at Philip's drawings in his study—and would only be there on invitation. "Someone" (95) would have had to trespass and look in a back window of the house from the relative privacy of the Bentley's back garden in order to see the crucifix hanging on the wall above the bed.

As Mrs. Bentley's anecdote about the crucifix indicates, individuals in the community compromise the Bentleys' physical space by ignoring their right to privacy within their own home. The anecdote helps to explain Mrs. Bentley's imaginative fancy that "Insistent pink roses on the walls of the bedroom are like eyes spying to report to the President of the Ladies Aid" (17). But wary as the Bentleys may be of intrusions into their physical and psychological space by individuals who are acquaintances,

they seem blissfully unaware of temptation, a more insidious intrusion committed by people Mrs. Bentley considers their friends—Paul Kirby and Judith West. Interestingly, both Paul and Judith represent the larger prairie garden. Paul comes from the Eden-like ranch where the Bentleys vacation. Judith, in contrast, comes from a failing prairie farm. Both Paul and Judith are figures of profound longing.

Blighted as it is, Mrs. Bentley's garden briefly houses temptation, a fact of which she herself seems blissfully unaware. "Paul came this afternoon," she writes,

. . . while I was in the garden, and squatting on his hunkers helped me clear away the dust that was drifted around my beans. . . . You learn a lot from a philologist. Cupid, he says, has given us *cupidity*, *Eros*, *erotic*, *Venus*, *venereal*, and *Aphrodite*, *aphrodisiac*" (101).

The veiled reference to temptation in other literary gardens is inescapable. Venus, we remember, is the goddess of fertility in the garden, and her counterpart, the Greek Aphrodite, is the mother-goddess. Cupid, the Roman counterpoint to the Greek god Eros, represents the god of love. Appropriately, Venus and Cupid are figures who inhabit the garden of love in traditional medieval literature—the pastoral garden that echoes Eden in literary tradition. They represent the important things missing from Mrs. Bentley's life—fertility and love. But more importantly, the fact that it is Paul, the philologist, who hunkers down on his haunches, in a highly corporeal pose, and who brings them into play in the garden, gives his presence and his

speech considerable resonance. When a philologist uses words, he uses them by design. As Paul's cultivating of romance in Mrs. Bentley's garden indicates, his presence in the Bentleys' lives has more to do with Mrs. Bentley than she is quite willing to acknowledge to herself, to Paul, or to Philip—even when Philip asks her "Why not get your mind off Paul, and remember you're a married woman?" (76).

Just as the serpent in the Garden of Eden beguiled (Genesis 3: 12) Eve with words, spilled them erotically into her ear, so the garrulous Paul beguiles Mrs. Bentley, whom he has impressed from their first meeting, and whose attention he has sought. Roy Daniells in his introduction to the 1957 reprint of *As For Me and My House* draws out Mrs. Bentley as an Eve figure, "comforting Adam after a fall in which she has played no contributory part" (Daniells, vii). Mrs. Bentley as Eve may comfort her Adam, but I would argue that through her unacknowledged relationship with Paul has contributed to Philip's fall on more than one plane—perhaps because of her repeated claim that for him the ministry is the wrong vocation. Philip's life is clearly as unhappy, as lonely, and as unfulfilled as her own in a time when, like the prairie garden she struggles to grow during years of penury and privation, the garden barely provides sustenance. However, Philip's fall may not be of the magnitude that Mrs. Bentley makes it out to be, nor does she necessarily deserve the entire blame for Philip's choice of vocation that was set before she ever met him. That being said, however, I propose that she contributes to his fall in the manner of Eve in the

garden, in that she, like Eve, acts independently. Eve's initiative that leads to Adam's also partaking in the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, ultimately results in their leaving the presence of God and the Garden of Eden. Mrs. Bentley's initiative results in the Bentleys also leaving the presence of God, as they leave the prairie garden and the ministry for the bookstore in the city.

In comparing Mrs. Bentley to Eve, Daniells casts the light of Eden on the prairie town struggling to survive in the extended drought of the 1930s. The importance of Daniells' comment to the present discussion depends on my assumption that the prairie space in which the Bentleys have lived in the twelve years of Philip's itinerant ministry is a garden—an unlikely one to be sure: riddled with dust, cursed with grasshoppers, cracked with heat. I would turn to the fact that critics such as Ricou and Moss concur with Daniells' observation that "the inner and outer world of the Bentleys correspond perfectly . . . for . . . in the simplest fashion their lives are the product of living in such an environment" (Daniells, vi). As the critics have pointed out, the prairie drought itself becomes the informing metaphor for the emotional and spiritual isolation of the characters in Mrs. Bentley's narrative in general, for whom survival is at stake—as the narrative of Mrs. Bentley's struggle to keep her garden alive suggests.

In addressing Ross's fiction in *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*, Ricou observes that "the struggle of man with the land results in isolated, perhaps lonely men and women" (20). I would

suggest the converse is also true—loneliness and isolation, rather than being the result of the struggle with the land, might instead be the cause of it. Independence is part of the equation as well. Mrs. Bentley and her garden bear out this point, the garden being the repository, so to speak, for Mrs. Bentley's independence. The lack of Philip's support, for example, does not deter her from having a garden. Moreover, because the garden provides her a degree of physical and imaginative escape, it serves to assuage her feelings of loneliness to some extent. Philip, Steve, Paul, and even the dog are in the garden with her at various times—helping out. Occasional and willing company in the garden notwithstanding, the point is that Mrs. Bentley—solitary, lonely, and out of place much of the time—is perhaps less lonely in the garden, the actions she performs there, providing temporary respite from the disappointments and anxieties of everyday life.

For Mrs. Bentley, disappointment and anxiety symbolized by the failing garden are in place from the moment the Bentleys arrive in town, despite the welcome they receive from Mrs. Finlay, the "President of the Ladies Aid" of Philip's new church, who meets them at the train and takes them to her house for dinner, through the drop-in visits of the parishioners when the Bentleys are unpacking, to Mrs. Ellingson's invitation to come for coffee and her gifts of the precious fuchsia and later, eggs and unsolicited advice, Philip and Mrs. Bentley have been welcomed into the town of Horizon and its surrounds. That Mrs. Bentley feels that she can not join is more a mark of her own

perception than it is that of others, a perception driven by the fact that she does not particularly want to join in: Horizon is the place she wants only to leave.

Mrs. Ellingson's gift of the fuchsia and the geranium slips precipitate Mrs. Bentley's plans for the garden:

Mrs. Ellingson called me over for coffee this morning, and while I was there gave me some geranium slips and a little fuchsia just coming into bed. For the present, till I can buy some pots, the slips are planted in tomato cans. The fuchsia has a table to itself, close enough to the window to catch an hour or two of morning sun, yet out in the room where I can look up and get the good of it. (33)

The detail she provides about the little plant reveals its importance to her. Essentially a small garden in the house, she treats it with care, placing it where it will thrive in limited exposure to sunlight. She dedicates to the plant not just space on the table, but gives it "a table to itself" (33), from where she can derive "the good" (33) from in this position. And as generous as she is with Steve, when he moves in and needs furniture, she refuses to move the fuchsia to give him the table it stands on. Mrs. Bentley is able to provide for the fuchsia some of the nurturing she herself so desperately needs—light and space in which to "grow," in the dark, oppressive house where nothing thrives: not music; not art; and especially not the human spirit. She draws out the fuchsia's importance in another way, too: "I have a slack perishable feeling tonight," she writes, adding that the fuchsia is "all I have left, that there's nothing

else to stave off the town, or help maintain my integrity" (33). The flowers here emphatically figure as a protective and stabilizing power to which she precariously clings.

According to *Flora's Lexicon*, the fuchsia symbolizes "confiding love" (246). Mrs. Ellingson's gift of the fuchsia, bestowed after Mrs. Bentley's response to the invitation to come for coffee, represents a gesture of welcome and acceptance in the town. As such, it is a gift of friendship—love. Mrs. Bentley clearly has better success with the fuchsia than she has with the flowers she plants in the garden. Had she failed to nurture the plant, the buds would have failed to blossom. They would instead have withered and dried up, and eventually dropped from the plant. However, the budding fuchsia comes into bloom, and when Mrs. Bentley, in turn, gives the fuchsia flowers to Paul and Steve, she bestows on them friendship and love. In one of the few truly spontaneous and celebratory moments in the novel, Mrs. Bentley gets caught in Paul's pleasure and excitement with his new clothes. The scene reveals that Mrs. Bentley simply may not recognize that Paul's dressing up is meant at least in part to impress her. In any case, her response is clearly teasing if not flirtatious:

I said how nice he looked, and then he went into the kitchen so that he could steal a glance or two at himself in the little mirror that hangs above the sink.

How did the coat fit across the shoulders he asked me presently, and did I like the fedora straight or at a little tilt? I showed him at just what tilt, and then on a

sudden impulse nipped off one of my precious fuchsias and pinned it on his lapel (71).

Paul allows Mrs. Bentley to pin the flower on him, and responds neither with overt pleasure in being fussed over, nor with obvious displeasure, but with an account of the fuchsia's botanical history. It is curious that his history does not include information about the flower's symbolic meaning. Even so, the scene feels intimate and private—a man consulting with a woman on his clothing. The consultation between a young and single man and a married woman borders on the inappropriate, but Mrs. Bentley acknowledges Steve's presence and recognizes his new clothes as well. "I looked round at Steve," (71) Mrs. Bentley writes, "and quickly nipped off another fuchsia for him" (71).

Steve, as Mrs. Bentley reports, who "had been proud of his new overalls and canvas shoes until Paul came" (71), accepts her gift of the fuchsia but discards it before they get to Partridge Hill for the Sunday church service. Paul, for his part, gets rid of his flower during the first prayer. Moreover, after the service, rather than lingering as he usually does, Paul slips off to wait in the back seat of the car until the Bentleys are ready to leave. As Mrs. Bentley explains, Paul, "dressed up so naively in his finery" (72), feels his pride and pleasure turning to shame when he sees others in freshly laundered but worn blue overalls.

Mrs. Bentley's whimsical spontaneity in giving the flowers belies the complexity of the gesture and clearly contributes to the discomfort of both Paul and Steve. The rejection of the

precious buds represents the symbolic rejection of the garden, as they discard her gift of the heart—the fuchsia—which she not only treasures, but depends on for “the good” (33) she derives from it. Spontaneous and innocent, even celebratory, Mrs. Bentley’s gesture might also be considered flamboyant. It represents cultural values that are not shared by the community in general. I would argue that given the hard economic times of the extended drought in the prairie community where people are struggling to survive, wearing a flower would be thought of as an ostentatious frippery at best. Even in good times, in a down-to-earth rural community, wearing a flower might draw comments about people—especially men—“putting on airs.” In the highly gendered world of the farming community, wearing a flower might raise questions about the masculinity. Paul, as a schoolteacher in a community of farmers, is awkwardly placed. He is educated, and, unlike the farmers in the failing garden, he has an income, however small. At the least, Paul is guilty of insensitivity to Mrs. Bentley’s gesture, but, what Mrs. Bentley does not seem to recognize is that her addition of the little flower to his lapel contributes to his flamboyance. His wearing of the flashy new outfit—a new blue suit with a fancy stripe, stunning tan shoes, and a pearl-gray fedora—could not fail to be noticed and resented by the struggling farmers with dependent families and no income who bears the markings of an intruder, much along the lines of the snake in Eden.

It is clear in any case that Mrs. Bentley’s garden becomes part of an investment of hope in that she will use its plants to

affirm herself. She needs the garden as she needs her music. "We're down in the mouth already" (18), she writes. "Tomorrow I must play the piano again, play it and hammer it and charge with it to the town's complete annihilation . . . for both our sakes I must" (18).⁹ The music and the garden provide psychological sustenance that is more important to Mrs. Bentley than either public musical performance or the produce of the garden, the best or worst of growing conditions notwithstanding. "I need the garden" (59) she writes. She needs it in a profound and basic way.

Close attention to Mrs. Bentley's garden reveals that its presence in her life, despite its being blighted, provides respite and refuge, a traditional function of the garden in Western Literature from the Garden of Eden forward. The garden affirms Mrs. Bentley's sense of herself as a nurturing human being capable of sustaining life despite obvious, inescapable, and life-altering losses, such as her shortened career as a concert pianist, her still-born son, and Philip's lack of success as a writer, artist, preacher, or provider. However, failure is only one part of the story.

Behind the garden lies the dream of fertility. In addition to the poppies, nasturtiums, fuchsias, and geraniums Mrs. Bentley worries over, she also refers to planting potatoes and onions,

⁹ Mrs. Bentley's choice of the word "annihilation" is interesting. Partially metaphorically annihilated by the church and wishing to escape its oppression, Mrs. Bentley would employ music to do much the same thing to the town. The oblique reference alludes to the arguments about culture that run through the novel.

and reports that her "peas and radishes are coming through" (89), and that "her beans are sprouting, too" (89). She records that the garden "keeps coming up and going down again" (97), and describes herself furtively creeping along the rows of the garden "scooping away dust and sand" "when Philip is away or busy in his study" (97). These details are indicative of her indefatigable creative spirit despite the rising evidence of the futility of her dreams. Her reports on the garden significantly end shortly after the Bentleys return from their vacation at the ranch, and Mrs. Bentley tells of "gathering up the last few withered red stalks and leaves" (138). Even then, though, there is in what she writes a glimmer of something more:

There was a single poppy that flowered while we were away. I snapped off the pod yesterday, shook the seeds into my palm and scattered them. "Casting ashes to the wind," an unexpected and unfeeling Philip asked, and I answered, "Obsequies." (138)

Philip's insensitive comment amounts to a cryptic benediction for Mrs. Bentley's funereal act of scattering the "ashes" (138). The implication is ambiguous. The scene evokes Shelley's ambiguously constructed wind in "Ode to the West Wind."¹⁰ In Philip's point of view, the garden is dead, but in Mrs. Bentley's action we can read as one of abiding hope for the future, the scattering of those few seeds comprising a poignant counter-image of her

¹⁰ See "The winged seeds where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within the grave, until
Thine azure sister of spring shall blow
Her clarion over the dreaming earth, and fill
With living hues and colours plain and hill (9-14, 290-91).

tenacity. However blighted the garden, the seeds might still grow. Casting ashes to the wind evokes the idea of casting fate to the wind, and bears significance in that the wind carries off the potential for sustained life in the garden that is within and without the Bentley's house.

For Mrs. Bentley, the garden takes on heightened significance, perhaps to the point of elevating to sacred¹¹ the notion of the garden's potential when things are rooted therein, Dick Harrison also employs the word "sacred" in a comment about the garden that has to do with the cultural codes that figure in small towns—sacred in that breaking them garners disapproval and reproof. Adherence to the codes marks the participants as "good" or "bad" citizens, as "ladies" or "gentlemen," for instance. To grow a garden is to participate in a code predicated on industry and self-sufficiency.

By dint of their condition, gardens bespeak their gardeners' passion and indifference, industry and thrift, and, it follows, their virtue. Like Paul's suit, a garden that is too showy would bespeak pretension and waste—if precious water and reasonably good soil were squandered on flowers when people needed food. On the other hand, having no garden or, perhaps worse, an ill-kempt one, would be demonstrative of a lack of industry or even indolence, would earn epithets such as self-

¹¹ In my introductory chapter I have drawn on Robert Kroetsch's notion of the "possibility of the garden" (LTW 79)

¹²Clavelle, personal notes from a talk on codes given by Harrison at the University of Manitoba, August 12, 2004). As Harrison observes, the codes in Ross's novel would make a lengthy and very interesting study on prairie life.

indulgent, lazy, or "shiftless" (16), the word Mrs. Finley applies to Judith's family and its unsuccessful farm "up in the sandhills north of town" (16).

It is a measure of Mrs. Finley's character that she resorts to such naming during drought years, when the garden was generally unproductive for the industrious and the indolent alike. Mrs. Finley clearly has little grasp of the severity of the prairie condition that condemns every crop from every garden in the region. Mrs. Bentley's garden is as dry and unproductive as any garden in the drought-stricken Canadian prairie. Given the various negative responses to her efforts from the digging of the garden through to watering it, it is not surprising that Mrs. Bentley takes to nurturing the garden covertly—and alone. But solitary activity derived from being alone becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Mrs. Bentley's inscription of herself as not being part of the community gains reinforcement from primarily solitary activities such as gardening and playing the piano.

Although she does not appear to recognize it when she claims that she can not join in because she and Philip have not shared growth and hardship in the region, her diary demonstrates that Mrs. Bentley *does* share in the hopes and disappointments of the people in the community. Mrs. Bentley, when she explains that she cannot join in because she and Philip are "detached, strangers, seeing it all objectively" (58), signals a significant misunderstanding of the adversity caused by the failed prairie garden—adversity that no one living on the prairies during the

drought could escape. The diary in its entirety is an example of Mrs. Bentley's expression of specific hopes and ambitions that she might not have shared with anyone, but which, at the same time, are not appreciably different from those of the people around her. She, like others in the region, struggles to flourish in the besieged prairie garden in which she too, no less than the farmers planting their gardens, plants seeds as a demonstration of hope and faith in the promise of their germination and fruition.

Mrs. Bentley's remark that she "can't join in" (58) is later followed by a telling observation: "I haven't any roots of my own any more" (199). In planting her garden, Mrs. Bentley seeks the restorative order derived from a sense of belonging, and more importantly, a sense of being loved—all of which parallel the promise of the biblical garden. Consider her comments about a previous garden in another Horizon the year after the Bentleys' baby was "stillborn" (45):

I used to say to myself, 'by the time the poppies are out he'll have his book half written. By the first snow he'll have reached the end. Next spring maybe we'll be away.' It was such a dark clenched year for him. That was why I had the garden, because when the dust was blowing, when the sun had burned, and my arms were sore and tired, then it seemed that I was sharing his struggle too. Somehow it brought me nearer to him, made me feel I mattered. (59)

It was a "dark clenched" (59) year for both Philip and Mrs. Bentley. They lost their baby, and Philip's book and Mrs.

Bentley's garden failed together, "the little leaves shrivelling up in the heat," she writes, "one by one (curling] up against the dusty earth" (59). The notion of shrivelling leaves symbolizes the Bentleys' failed creativity in life and in art. Mrs. Bentley's need to feel physically that she is sharing in Philip's struggle, to feel that she matters to him—in other words, feels loved—is also expressed in the metaphor of the curling leaves. In tending to the garden, Mrs. Bentley too curls up against the earth, in her effort to derive protection from the disorder of the world around her. Later in the diary, Mrs. Bentley again employs the metaphor of the curled leaves in relation to Philip. "He tried to laugh," she writes, "but the sound curled up on him the same way my sick little poppy and nasturtium leaves curl up against the blistered earth" (104). Again, the implication is that a diminishing in human life (here a loss of ease and rejoicing) is realized as a loss.

But other comments that align Philip's book with the garden are coded with hope. In the words "by the time;" "by the first snow;" and "next spring" (59) reside signals of anticipation, hope for change, and faith in the future. The passage comprises a ring of metaphors.

The physical, spiritual and economic disorder in the Bentleys' lives symbolically parallels the failed garden. Consider the parsonage in which they stay. Mrs. Bentley's first description of the parsonage—inside and out—is troubling: "It's a small squat, grayish house and pushed up against the big glum grayish church it looks so diminutive that I'm reminded of the

mountain that did all the fussing and then gave birth to a mouse" (19). Like the garden behind it, the house serves as a metaphor for the failing, drought-stricken community on the one hand, and the Bentleys' blighted spiritual condition on the other. As Mrs. Bentley observes, the town and the church, which are part of the agricultural economy are directly affected by the environmental conditions, blessed or blighted, across the growing season. "The crops are the town's bread and butter too," she says, "and the first place to feel the pinch is the collection plate" (72). The Bentleys certainly feel the economic pinch in their stipend from the church as well as in their physical living conditions. Their poor financial state derives, at least in part, from Philip's reluctance to "ask for his salary" (13) because, as Mrs. Bentley puts it, he "doesn't belong" in the church (13).

Gray on the inside as well the house reflects the cumulative effects of five years of drought in a farming community dependent on the agricultural garden in the prairies during the Great Depression. The house smells musty; the roof leaks during the spring and the water creates "a dark sodden stain that has crept across the ceiling and down the wall right to the floor" (10). That there is a lack of colour throughout portends a drained and dessicated life, all the juices dried out of it. The wind blows dust into the house through the same cracks that allow the warmth of the wood fire to escape in the winter. Moreover, Mrs. Bentley writes, "The way we're crowded so close against the church the light comes colourless and glum all afternoon. It's hard to laugh or speak naturally" (34). The

Bentleys' entire existence is pinched in the expanding blight of the prairie garden. For instance, the failure of the prairie church communities to pay their preacher comes to bear directly on how the Bentleys live: for example, scrimping and saving money on food and otherwise "making-do" by tearing up old house dresses to use for tissues rather than buying them speaks to difficult economic circumstances. The produce from a vegetable garden would help a little, but Mrs. Bentley gets no harvest from her garden.

Failing fertility notwithstanding, Mrs. Bentley's garden manifests hope in a time when the world beyond is in chaos and despair, disorder derived from a series of environmental and geographical circumstances over which inhabitants of the prairies have little if any control—prolonged and relentless drought in the Palliser triangle, and their psychological, physical, and spiritual response to it. As Laurence Ricou points out, the Bentleys share with their community a sense of "vulnerability in the landscape, and in the universe" (83). The Bentleys' psychological and physical response to their surroundings is one thing—drought passes, as will spiritual response to it. The Bentleys, however, are in spiritual crisis. The result of living in false piety, their spiritual crisis can only be resolved by Philip and Mrs. Bentley moving toward what she considers their true vocations: art and music. Until that happens, their spiritual crisis and longing will continue indefinitely.

Longing derives from circumstances of physical, psychological, and spiritual privation. The garden represents Mrs. Bentley's need to assuage her longings. In the past, she

gardened after the still birth of her own baby, and in the present, she gardens in longing and hope for the future—before the arrival of the infant she will adopt as her own.

The garden, as the site of yearning for the baby lost to her, is also the site of a yearning for the music lost to her when she became the wife of a minister. As Mrs. Bentley stands in the dark garden, her longings awakened by the wind-borne song of a saxophone "waving and slender like a fine thread of light . . . poignant and mellow" (65), she entertains thoughts of release into the freedom of both the music and the dance. Philip, when he comes out to the garden, is the one who mentions dancing. "I suppose, if we know how, we could dance a little just ourselves out here" (64), he comments. However gentle his suggestion, Mrs. Bentley rejects it. "I could feel that his arm was helpless and wooden too" (64), she writes. Even for the passive and indifferent Philip, the garden, under the cover of darkness music, offers possibility. For a brief moment there exists, as an echo of his earlier physical activity in the garden, the chance for the passive and physically inactive minister to become active at a relatively primal level. Moreover, the garden (and the music) offer the same possibility to him as it offers his wife—the possibility of escape from the restraint from the house, which is as shrouded by the church-shaded light of day as it is shrouded by the lamp-shadowed light of night.¹³

¹³ Mrs. Bentley refers at least a half-dozen times to failing lamplight in the evenings as she tries to write by the light of a single oil lamp. See 37, 67, 114, 146, 150, 215.

The escape from the house into the garden filled with dance music serves as a metaphor for the Bentleys' escape into a more secular existence less governed by the Church. Whereas the escape into a music-filled garden represents a move away from the Church and the Gospel for the minister and his wife, for her it also represents a move away from the gospel of classical music or "high art."

The Horizon and the horizon with which Mrs. Bentley and her itinerant preacher husband struggle during the year Mrs. Bentley keeps the diary is only in part the manifestation of five years of the land's failure to produce sustenance sufficient to sustain the people trying to live on it. The Horizon, which Mrs. Bentley so desperately tries to look beyond, has been shaped by spiritual, intellectual, and social failures of varying degree that affect long-term residents and in-comers alike. Mrs. Bentley's little garden stands as an antidote to the larger failure and blight of the prairie place. Moreover, it stands as testimony to imagination, creativity, and indefatigable hope in the face of despair, and it projects itself toward the larger prairie garden with its parallel narratives of promise and denial, what Robert Kroetsch names as "the myth of the new world, the garden story. The Dream of Eden."¹⁴

The notions of myth, the garden story, and the dream of Eden find realization in W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a narrative wherein "innocents" in the garden are represented, in

¹⁴ Robert Kroetsch, *Lovely Treachery of Words*, 32.

part, by figures constructed as new world Adams with narratives of origin appropriate to relatively newly settled prairie place.

Chapter Two

*A Prairie Boy's Garden: A Prairie Boy's Garden:
W.O. Mitchell's Eden in Who Has Seen the Wind*

*Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow their heads,
The wind is passing by.*

Christina Rosetti

*As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the
field so he flourisheth.*

*For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone: and the
place thereof shall know it no more.*

Psalms CIII: 15-16

*Many interpreters of the Bible believe the wind to be
symbolic of Godhead This is a story of a boy and
the wind.*

W.O. Mitchell

To some, such as W.O. Mitchell's young boy in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the prairies are a world of wonder, a world inspirited by the wind, the very breath of God. Mitchell articulates the notion of the inspiriting wind in the comment that precedes the opening lines of the narrative. In the comment on the wind and the young boy, Mitchell both foregrounds and provides background for his subject—the garden and a human relationship with it. Mitchell, in writing the myth of childhood in a particular place, constructs a compound myth of origin as it applies to Brian O'Connell, the innocent in the prairie garden.

In *Another Time*, Canadian literary critic Eli Mandel notes the recurring presence of "the myth of childhood" (51) in

Canadian prairie writing. For Mandel, the myth of childhood has two forms: one identified with the land-comic-and one identified with alienation from the land-tragic. In the tragic form, Mandel writes, alienation "takes shape as conflict between father and son, often over the treatment of the land itself; or as a conflict with father and daughter with incestuous implications about the nature of liberated instinct" as in Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (51). Alternately, Mandel writes, "the tragic form takes shape as a father's search for a child; as in Grove's *Over Prairie Trails* and Ross's *As For Me and My House*" (51). I see another alternative, however. I propose that the comic and tragic forms also take shape in literature that purports to be from a child's point of view, for example, Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Mandel observes in Mitchell's writing a Wordsworthian view of childhood imposed on a "Rousseauistic sense of the natural world" (52). Moreover, he continues to say that within the images of prairie writing are images "of a search for home and therefore a search for the self" (52). The point is that the land-I propose the garden, and, irrevocably the myth of the garden and humankind within-rests at the centre of the prairie consciousness.

Mandel holds that "the term 'prairies' means a conceptual framework" and "that the prairie artist chooses images that help to fill in the conceptual framework" (52). "The distinctive element of prairie literature," Mandel writes, "is not, surely, the creation of a new man, but the adaptation of images of the environment to a pattern that belongs to all . . ." (51). In

concurrence with Mandel, I propose that nowhere is the literary pattern of prairie writing more clear than in the myths of prairie place that derive from other literary gardens, and most notably from the garden of Western literary tradition, the Garden of Eden.

W.O. Mitchell's novel *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947) is the story of a young boy—an "innocent"—in an Edenic garden-like habitat in the Canadian prairies, an environment inspirited by the wind, the very breath of God. The root of the words "inspire" (animate), and "inspirit" (animate), is the Latin "inspirare," meaning "breathe in" (OED). The notion of inspiration in the sense of animating or breathing in inhabits each of the three quotations that comprise the epigraph of Mitchell's novel. For Mitchell, the wind is inspiriting: it figures as the agent of inspiration, and moreover, it figures as God. In the quotation from Rosetti, the trees bow their heads as though to gesture their respect for the Power passing through them. The quotation from *The Book of Psalms*, serves doubly as a reminder of the temporality and transience of life and the power of the wind—by implication the power of God—to which life itself cedes. Mitchell's statement, in turn, overtly connects the wind to the Godhead and, ultimately, to the sensitive child-protagonist, Brian Sean MacMurray O'Connal.

Brian, from age four, is increasingly drawn to the prairie that comprises Mitchell's prairie version of the garden of The Book of Genesis:

Here was the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky. . . .It lay wide around the town, stretching tan to the far line of sky, clumped with low buck brush and wild rose bushes, shimmering under the late June sun and waiting for the unending visitation of wind, gentle at first, barely stroking the long grasses and giving them life. (3)

Whereas heaven and earth comprise the first line of the creation story in Genesis, land and sky comprise the first sentence of Mitchell's novel. The word "unending" asserts that the place is Eden-like in its constant qualities of being limitless in space and time. The word "visitation" subtly underscores the presence of God in that the wind, by inspiriting the prairie, echoes the visitation of the inspiriting Holy Spirit to the hitherto barren Elizabeth, mother of John, and Mary, Mother of Jesus (Luke 1: 5-57). Moreover, the description of the "unending visitation" of the wind, "gentle at first," giving life to the grasses, inspiriting and animating, overtly evokes the two primordial moments in the biblical narrative: when "the Spirit of God moved across the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2); and when the breath of the Divine enters and animates Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:7).

In proposing that the wind inspirits the prairie as the Godhead inspirited the Garden of Eden, Mitchell is proposing the prairie as Eden. To that end, he presents multiple oral narrative versions of the creation of the prairie garden by means of several story-telling characters, all of whom, choose the

Saskatchewan prairies as the setting for their loosely derivative primordial versions of the Biblical story of origin. The narratives of Brian's Uncle Sean, his grandmother, the Reverend Hislop, and the parodic, prophet-cum-fool-saint, Saint Sammy, are among those most informing for the boy.

Of the versions of the "in-the-beginning" narratives that set prairie as a Garden of Eden in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Saint Sammy's are most obviously tied to the narrative of Genesis. When Brian, Fat, and Ike—Artie, in earlier editions of the novel—visit Saint Sammy, Ike, bent on getting Saint Sammy "going," has a question ready for him: "What's Heaven like?" (201) he asks . . . "What's Heaven like?" . . . "Sammy, tell about when—" (210). In response, Sammy begins what Dick Harrison refers to as one of his Jeremiads (Harrison, *Intimations*, 40), a harangue reminiscent of a "Bible Bill" Aberhart radio broadcast. (I have elsewhere discussed Aberhart in connection with Robert Kroetsch's character Johnnie Backstrom in *The Words of My Roaring*.) Sammy's speech might perhaps best be described as a lyrical-colloquial, biblical vernacular:

He give them a few days an' accordin' to the Image 'n His
 eyes on their hearts. Fer they have played the harlot an'
 the fornicator in the sight a' the Lord!
 . . . An' there is sorra an' sighin' over the face a the
 prairie—Herb an' the seed thereof thirsteth after the water
 which don't cometh! The cut-worm cutteth—the rust rusteth
 an' the 'hopper hoppeth! (210)

The phrase "accordin' to the Image" evokes the creation of humankind in God's image (Genesis I:26-27), as "the face of the prairie" (210) evokes the "face of the deep" and the "face of the waters" of Genesis 1: 2 and 3. Saint Sammy's words are remarkable in their similarity to the words that Sean has earlier used to describe "Saint Sammy-in-the-pianuh-box," who "used to farm the old Horn place" (130). As Sean puts it, Saint Sammy endured

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 got up an' got good an' goddam tired out.
(130)

Sean's list comprises a point-form narrative of the history of settlement in Saskatchewan and the cyclical difficulties (derived from floods and drought) of farming there from about 1885 through the "dirty thirties." (Barry Potyondi points out that due to plant diseases and insect pests, which, to some extent were directly attributable to the both breaking of and repeated sowing of croplands, estimated economic losses to the prairie region ran well into millions of dollars (cf. Potyondi and Nemanishen, 121). The possessed prophet Sammy is one of the dispossessed farmers (The Ben appears to be another) who has met the challenge of living in the prairie at the cost of his sanity. Saint Sammy lives by virtue of his wit, his creativity, and, to some extent, the kindness of others. All things considered, Brian's empathic comment that "it would be easy for a fellow to go crazy out on the prairie—all by himself" (205) takes on a

tinge of irony: if being alone was all Saint Sammy or Sean, or The Ben had to contend with, they would probably manage relatively well. Sammy, though, does not consider himself to be alone in the prairie. He considers himself to be with the Lord in the prairie Eden—hence the creation story he tells to the boys.

When Ike persists in his taunting with the question about Heaven, "What's it like, Sammy? . . . What's it like?" (211), Sammy responds with a prairie creation story:

To start with He give a flip to the fly-wheel a thought,
 an' there was Heaven an' earth an' Him plumb in the middle
 . . . 'Let there be light,' He seth, an' there was some.
 'Suits Me fine,' He seth, 'an' I'm a-gonna call her night,
 'an' I'm a-gonna call her day.' He took an' He gathered all
 the water together so the dry land stuck up; 'that there is
 dry earth,' He seth. 'Grass,' He seth, 'let her come.' An'
 she come. She jumped up green

"Next He made the critters.

"An he got to thinkin', there ain't nobody fer to till
 this here soil, to one-way her, to drill her, ner to stook
 the crops, an' pitch the bundles, an' thrash her, when
 she's ripe fer thrashin', so He took Him some topsoil—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. . . .(211)

As with traditional "in-the-beginning" narratives, so it is with Saint Sammy's narrative, as he too, integrates into his story details of the world around him. Culture is inextricable from narrative. Had the Garden of Eden narrative originated in the Canadian interior, say, the keeper of the Lord's garden would have been engaged in tasks in accordance with the human activities in the Interior. For example, as opposed to tending vineyards indigenous to the Mediterranean region, the Lord's gardener in the Interior would perhaps tend to Saskatoon or cranberry bushes. Moreover, the keeper of the garden in the Interior would have the task of preserving moose, deer, or bison rather than sheep, the predominant animal of the Bible.

Like Adam in the Garden of Eden, Saint Sammy, as "Jehovah's hired man" (279, 281), and likewise, Sean as "keeper of the Lord's vineyard," bear proprietary responsibility for the keeping of the prairie garden. Catching a butterfly, for example, Saint Sammy explains that he is acting according to God's imperative: "the voice a the Lord come ontuh me sayin' 'Sammy, Sammy, save me the brown ones (butterflies),' on'y there ain't but yella an' white ones . . ." (210). The "brown ones" (210) are clearly less abundant. The colour of the butterfly suggests that it is probably a North American butterfly indigenous to the prairie garden. The point is worth visiting briefly. Saint Sammy's task is to save the brown butterflies. The impulse to save something derives from the acknowledgment that it is precious, and in danger of being lost. The existence of only yellow and white

butterflies and the imperative to save the brown ones hint at the garden's response to change in light of changing human use of it. In other words, the decline of the brown butterfly may be related to the extended presence of humans who, in changing the prairie garden from the natural to the agricultural state, are radically altering prairie space. The notion of Saint Sammy saving the butterflies suggests that the drought, which radically alters the prairie garden, is only partly responsible for the changes in it. This implication is borne out elsewhere in the book. Consider, for instance, the suggestion at the end of the novel that the young boy appears to be following in Sean's and Saint Sammy's footsteps. The suggestion that he has an interest in becoming a "dirt doctor" (315), indicates that he too senses the ephemeral nature of the place as well as the need to preserve it.

The butterflies, like birds in the novel—meadowlarks, in particular, that serve poetically to replace the thrush or the nightingale of literary tradition—help to construct the prairie garden as a site of beauty, despite the drought that devastates it. The butterfly is the symbol for Psyche, the mythological figure that we would in Christian theology, name the soul. Butterflies become metaphor in the description of what father and son see after burying the baby pigeon. At the prairie's "far line" (69), the narrator observes, "sheet lightning, elusive as a butterfly, winked up the world's dark rim" (69). Butterflies, then, represent not only the connection with the soul, but rarity and ephemerality as well. The butterfly is one of the images that

connect Saint Sammy, the Young Ben, and Brian to the "natural" and Eden-like prairie garden, as well as to each other. Innocents to varying extents, all three characters demonstrate strong ties to the prairie space as it figures romantically and Edenically around them.

Saint Sammy's saving of the butterflies for the Lord indicates his sensitivity to the changes wrought by the encroachment of settlement on hitherto unsettled land. (The argument herein is not that the land has been previously unused, simply that the use of the land changed from what it was prior to pioneer settlement.) Mrs. MacMurray, in using the grizzly bear for her "pourquoi tale," demonstrates a subtle awareness of the changing habitat as well. The pourquoi tale is a form of a story of origin in that it offers an explanation for how something comes to be, for example, why the raven is black. Mrs. MacMurray's tale suggests her awareness of changes in the environment wrought by human presence in the garden. Although we do not commonly consider the effect of human presence in the Garden of Eden, certainly the presence of Adam and Eve would have affected the garden of Genesis as well. Adam and Eve were in Eden to keep the garden for the Lord, but they could apparently live peacefully in the garden, without their presence disrupting the natural flow of life therein. The implication of the narrative in the Garden of Eden is that the garden is a place of peaceful harmony.

Not so the prairie garden, where the presence of humans discourages wildlife, in general. For instance, due to the permanent presence of humans, the grizzly bear had all but disappeared from the prairie by the time the MacMurrays settled there in the mid-1880s. Mrs. MacMurray's story however indirectly, serves to preserve at least a sense of the erstwhile presence of the grizzly. Saint Sammy's Clydesdale horses serve similarly in that they too represent the prairie past. As indigenous prairie animals are in decline, so are the imported domestic animals.

The disappearing bears, butterflies, and even the Clydesdales, contribute to one of the more subtle patterns of transience related to nature and "the natural" in the text. Given that his only shelter on the prairie is a piano box, Saint Sammy perhaps occupies the prairie space more "naturally" and more humbly than his prairie-dwelling counterparts who live less naturally in the prairie garden, certainly less-pridefully than Bent Candy, for example, who builds a new barn, "a thing of beauty and pride" (283), in anticipation of forcing Sammy to sell the horses Candy covets.

In contrast to the wealthy Bent Candy, with his tractors and new barn, Saint Sammy lives a simple life in the prairie garden. As Jehovah's hired man" (279), he works to conserve an ephemeral way of life. He inadvertently, but effectively, provides in his vernacular narrative a version of the prairie garden that visits the agricultural practises of the contemporary

present as well as the ancient past: tilling (plowing) the soil; one-waying (pulling a harrow on which all the discs slant in the same direction); drilling (sowing) the seed; stooking, pitching, and threshing the crop. Tilling, sowing, harvesting, and threshing are as old as agricultural practise, and the naming of them serves to connect the book's contemporary present, to the ancient past.

In Sammy's creation story, God makes Adam not just from dirt, but from topsoil—the richest and best soil available—and He places him on "a section to the East in the districk a Eden" (211). The words "section" and "districk," in this context are specific to the delineation of prairie land into basic land-holding units by the Dominion Land Survey. Clearly, Sammy's "districk" of Eden, and by implication the garden, comprises the prairie where he lives. It is important to the novel's connection with the biblical narrative and to the romantic nature of Mitchell's prairie that "the Lord waits for Sammy in the east corner a the pasture—the Lord's corner" (211). In this instance, the narrative construction parallels the Lord and Adam in the Garden of Eden. The fact that the Lord waits for Sammy "in the east corner" reinforces the notion that Sammy is in Eden and not east of it. Moreover, it indicates that he *envisions* himself in the garden—despite considerable personal loss that might tempt him to think otherwise.

Sammy, with his biblical inscriptions, is a composite figure who brings to the novel the influence of figures and

events from books of the Old Testament. Saint Sammy's creation story, as it describes the Lord giving a "flip to the fly-wheel a thought" (211), figures the Lord as a farmer. God made man in His image, and that image on Sammy's Saskatchewan prairie, is a farmer. According to the biblical narrative, "the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and keep it" (Genesis 2.15). Saint Sammy's version of the narrative is specific to himself. According to Saint Sammy, the Lord put him into the prairie Eden to serve as his "hired man" (279). "Jehovah's hired man" (279) notwithstanding—interestingly, there are other figures who are similarly inscribed in the novel. Sean's hired man, Ab, for example, is also filled with religious fervour, and there is the suggestion that perhaps Brian will take up a related vocation in his adult life.

As Sean hybridizes the narratives of traditional Irish tales, and as Mrs. MacMurray hybridizes traditional *pourquoi* and tall-tales, so Saint Sammy revises his narratives. Consider Saint Sammy's narrative related to the fulfilment of promise and prophesy that extends to The Book of Ezekiel and to The Book of Revelation. The narrative of The Book of Ezekiel recounts that on "the fifth day . . . a stormy wind came out of the north" (Ezekiel 1:4). Sammy's smiting-day narrative also opens on the fifth day—"the Lord's day to punish Bent Candy" (280) for having tried to force Sammy to sell the Clydes "er git off the land" (282). In the end, Bent Candy's come-uppance is that the wind destroys his new red barn to the point that it looks as though it

has "been put through a threshing machine and exhaled through the blower" (289). Here the prairie metaphor extends even to the re-creation of the biblical windstorm. But it is Bent Candy's change of heart in the aftermath of the storm that facilitates Saint Sammy's Jeremiad in which he reveals his vision and his prophecy of hope for an irrefutably Edenic prairie garden besides:

I looked an' I beheld! The Heavens was opened up, an' there was a whirlwind a-comin' outa the East, liftin' like a trumpet a-spinnin' on her end, an' there was fire inside her, an' light like a sunset was all around her! Plumb outa the midst a her come the voice a the Lord sayin' 'Sammy, Sammy git up from offa thy knees fer I am gonna speak ontuh you! The prairie shall be glad, an' she shall blossom like the rose! Yay, she shall blossom abundantly! The eyes a the blind shall see, an' the ears a the deaf shall hear! The lame is gonna leap like the jack rabbit, and th' water shall spout ontuh the prairie, an' the sloughs shall be full-plumb full! (289)

The Lord speaks here in the prairie vernacular as opposed to using the biblical rhetoric that might be expected in the Lord's speech—especially given the ties to the Biblical narratives upon which Sammy's narratives depend. Sammy's exuberant hyperbole, as he considers the end of the drought and the narrative of healing that will ensue in the prairie Eden, exceeds even biblical proportion—with sloughs being "plumb full" (289), and the lame leaping like (prairie) jack rabbits (289).

Sammy's narrative of abundance draws us back to Brian's wondrous first impression of a vibrant, Eden-like prairie garden that is predominantly oral and pre-eminently romantic. As another of the "innocents" in the novel, Saint Sammy, who takes in a prairie that is much like Brian's, is one of the characters in the novel who is "like" the prairie to some extent. Among the other "innocents" indigenous to Brian's prairie Eden are the Young Ben, who "has the wind on him all the time" (27), and looks "a little like a coyote" (111). Given his connection to owls, The Ben's red-rimmed eyes (93) and "grey hair in tufts at either temple" (292) especially liken him to the great horned owl, in particular. To a lesser-degree, Sean too is connected with the indigenous prairie. The grains of wheat in his pockets (17) as though growing out of him, and the "moustaches stained with tobacco juice" (126), link him to the tobacco juice-spitting grasshoppers. Consider, for instance, that on "the Lord's smiting day" (281), when Saint Sammy walks across the prairie, "aware of the rising wind in the grasses . . . the stitching sound of crickets was in his ears like his own blood" (280). When Brian hears the prairie garden for the first time he also notices the wind, "the stitching sound of grasshoppers, the sudden relief of a meadow lark's song" (14). In Sammy's vision of the prairie, as in Brian's, the sun haloes the fox-tails, a dragonfly hangs "on shimmering wings" (14), and hovers with glistening "amber wings" (280). In this version of the prairie garden, the pastoral quality renders the place Edenic. Evocative of Eden as well is

the natural abundance of the prairie that is implicit in Mitchell's inclusion of the indigenous and common fox-grass, for example, or gophers and grasshoppers whose populations increase dramatically during periods of prairie drought.¹

As the Edenic garden is a story of origin, so is the story of the Eden-like prairie garden a story of origin. Sean, Mrs. MacMurray, Mr. Hislop, and, as we have seen, Saint Sammy, each tell Brian their versions of the beginning of the prairie place just in the form of a creation story informed by prairie place as the original creation story was informed by the part of the world from which it derives. Interestingly, Mitchell's stories, like the story in Genesis, derive from traditions of Orality. Sean's narrative, like Saint Sammy's narrative, is a parody of Genesis in that it comprises an in-the-beginning account of the prairie garden as told from Sean's point of view. As Adam was keeper of the Garden of Eden, Sean, with his proprietary spirit, is keeper

¹ The novel is filled with other narratives that, although they take place in the garden, are beyond the scope of the present discussion on the garden per se. For instance, consider the narrative about The Bens (The Ben himself is an extraordinary story-teller) or the narrative of the Wongs that ends with the suicide of the father—a story reminiscent of Stegner's anecdote about the Chinese brothers in *Wolf Willow*. Consider, as well, the story of Reverend. Hislop, who falls victim to Mrs. Abercrombie's mean-spirited Presbyterian prejudices; or Miss MacDonald, Brian's first teacher, whose preferential treatment of Mariel Abercrombie (clearly her mother's daughter), stands in distinct contrast to her evident dislike of both Brian and the Young Ben. In these stories, defining and being defined by one's place has more to do with social than physical environment. The concern of the present discussion, however, resides in the stories told directly to Brian—those of Sean, the grandmother, Hislop, and Saint Sammy—that, together comprise an Eden-like prairie garden.

of the garden on the prairie, a connection that becomes clear when he identifies himself as "keeper of the Lord's vineyard, literally" (21).

The prairie garden has several attributes in common with Eden, not the least of which is the fact that it too is "walled," if not literally, at least figuratively. The importance of Eden being walled has to do with the perception of space. Even an imagined garden wall can serve the express purpose of defining limitless space and making that space comprehensible. As I have noted in other discussions on gardens—particularly in Robert Kroetsch's novel, *The Words of My Roaring* and Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*—garden walls or fences function variously to enclose, protect, and define space. In the context of outdoor space, the particular use of the word wall or fence is a matter of semantics. The walls around Eden that first kept Adam and Eve *in*, and then after the Fall, kept them *out* of the Garden of Eden, serve additionally to separate the garden from the wilderness surrounding it. The choosing of a garden for the setting of the biblical story in the first place implicitly attests to the importance of gardens in early Mesopotamia—Bible stories being reflective of time and place contemporaneous with their telling. More important perhaps, is the garden as an image. Setting is often the handmaid of narrative when it comes to making an image of place comprehensible to listeners or readers in relation to their experience of it.

Fences on the Canadian prairies might not physically resemble the walls-fences-of biblical Mesopotamia, but barbed wire or page wire, and geographer's survey markers fulfil the primary purpose of delineating space. The Dominion Land Survey of Western Canada of 1871 comprises notions of delineated space as well. Indeed, survey lines drawn on paper to represent divided space have repeatedly been transformed into road allowances that also physically divide space on the ground. As his description of meeting the little man on the "south forty" (19), indicates, Sean conceives of his farm according to surveyors' designations, the term the "south forty" (19) referring to his quarter-mile quarter-section of summer fallow. The Geographical Survey divided most of Western Canada into one-mile-square sections for agricultural and other use. The survey imposed on the land a one-mile grid that effectively ordered prairie space and divided it into small parcels comprising the quarter-sections (one hundred and sixty acres) that prairie settlers acquired as homesteads, and began to "break," cultivate, and then plant with various crops in the hope of sustaining themselves and their families.

As tending to the Lord's garden was among the first of Adam's activities in the Garden of Eden, so the tending of crops on their quarter-section parcels of the prairie garden comprised the first activities of the Anglo-European homesteaders represented in Sean's narrative. As Adam was an "innocent" in the first garden, the settlers on the prairies were, to some extent, innocents in their garden place. In the novel, those innocents

are represented in part by a young child who, like Adam, actively engages in acts of naming and gathering knowledge of the place in which he lives. Naming and gathering knowledge are every child's task and every immigrant's task, the performance of which replicates the actions of the first man in the Biblical garden in moving through a series of "first" discoveries in "first" encounters with the new and unknown.

Brian's request for Uncle Sean's folk-tale of prairie place informs the child about the prairie garden. "Tell about the little man," Brian begs (19), and his Uncle Sean begins a story of origin that, with its natural flora and fauna, asserts a somewhat Edenic, and certainly romantic, place:

Saw him just the day before yesterday . . . He popped out of a gopher hole in my south forty. I'd just climbed down from the rod weeder to untangle her, and there he was, standing in front of the Roosian thistle-wearin' two-inch overhaws and with a rabbit's foot fob to his watch. 'God Bless this fine summer fallow and us two that's on it,' he sez, 'an' good morning.

"Well, I don't make a hobby of talkin' to little men standin' about as high as a sprig of pigweed and picking their teeth with the fine hair off a crocus nearby. . . . You're a stranger around here, are you?"

'Oh, no, he sez, I come to the distrik in eighty-five-after they hung Looie Riel for starting that rebellion.' 'Not much here then,' I sez.

"No town at all," he sez. Just the river an' little green frogs hoppin' up an' down on the banks. The town came later" (19).

Although gophers (and thistles, for that matter) might not necessarily be considered positive indigenous attributes of Edenic prairie place among farmers whose crops they ruin, they are in Sean's narrative, at least, worthy not only of inclusion in his story, but also of even a little affection, as the doubly parodic narrative indicates. The implicit affection derives from Sean's giving the gopher his own Irish ancestral speech and characterizing the animal as a local farmer dressed (with the exception of the farmer's smock) much the same as Sean himself. Consider the little man dressed in the style of prairie farmers with his "two-inch overhaws and a rabbit's foot fob to his watch" (19), gregariously opening the conversation: "'God Bless this fine summer fallow and us two that's on it,' he sez, 'an' good morning'" (19). Sean's parody works in reverse, as well, in that it characterizes farmers as being somewhat gopher-like, a comparison made on the grounds of gophers' resemblance to little men² standing upright. This is apt, given that gophers and farmers are competing against each other in harvesting the crop. The inclusion of the gopher in Sean's story derives additionally from Sean's obvious affection for traditional Irish narratives

² Robert Kroetsch's prairie long poem, *Seed Catalogue*, interestingly, humourously takes the gopher as the model for men in the prairie garden.

and their wee-folk, as he indicates in his use of the hybrid little man / gopher in the first place.

In Sean's narrative, as well, is another example of the appearance of the crocus in a piece of prairie writing. I have elsewhere discussed the importance of the crocus and the implications of its inclusion in texts such as Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, and particularly, in Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*. In short, the crocus is to prairie writing as the lilac is to Walt Whitman, and, in generations before him, as the iris is to Greek mythology, or the icon of the rose to the Virgin Mary. In every case, the flowers serve to locate the narratives doubly: in local place and in literary tradition.

In addition to marking springtime in Mitchell's novel, the crocus signifies particular rural prairie space—the natural prairie garden—that has thus far escaped the plunder of the plough. In Sean's narrative, the crocus grows "nearby," not in the summer fallow, and not among the weeds for which the farmer has unwittingly provided optimum growing conditions. Like Sean, Brian's grandmother's reference to the crocus effectively asserts its presence in the wild, virgin prairie garden.

In her mind she lived them (the prairie days) over, picking crocuses if she willed it; freckle-throated tiger lilies, Saskatoons, wild strawberries, pin cherries There was silver wolf willow from the bank of the river running by the long homestead hut; the faint, honey smell of it remained long with her as she reminisced. (295)

In Sean's narrative, like the grandmother's as well, rests the implication of Edenic abundance. Mrs. MacMurray's list here, as it names the flora of the garden and demonstrates her knowledge of it, suggests that like Sean's little man, she, an old-timer too, "liked the look of her" (19). The comic vision of the "little man" picking his "teeth with the hair off a crocus" indicates that Sean, as well, knows intricately both his garden and what grows there—on either side of his garden wall. As keeper of the garden, Sean clearly values what the garden produces.

Sean's narrative, as it provides a narrative of origin, parodies the oral history of the beginning of the settlement of Anglo-Europeans on the Saskatchewan prairie. In the vein of a quest narrative, Sean's account of his meeting with the little man presents a historical-cum-tall-tale account of the Irish immigrants in the West: crossing the Atlantic "third-class," and spending some time in Ontario before coming West to the end of the steel railway tracks. The CPR "wasn't finished in them days," Sean explains, continuing: "From there he (the little man) come on a three-gaited sorrel grasshopper that went lame in the Moose Mountain country" (20). The conclusion of Uncle Sean's story reveals both a vision and re-vision of place reflective of the contemporary state of the drought-stricken prairie garden.

'What the hell made you pick this country?' I)Uncle Sean) asked him. 'I liked the look of her in them days,' he sez.

'Look at her now,' I sez.

'You look,' sez he. 'She gives me the heartburn!' (20)

Sean's question to the little man is one that, throughout several periods of hardship, especially drought, struggling settlers must have asked among themselves.

The imaginary old-timer's laconic answer to Sean's question of why he settled on the prairie—"I liked the look of her" (20)—is characteristic of male figures in prairie literature. However brief, the simple explanation masks hope and imagination among other things, such as a stoicism derived from not having the resources to make changes. The little man is clearly figured as an immigrant homesteader for whom desire is tantamount to imagination: immigrants' reasons for leaving home and going to the "new" place are myriad. The fact that he liked the look of "this country" (20), and the disappointment evident in his comment "she gives me the heartburn" (20), clearly stems from the hopeful imagination tempered by the drought. However, whereas those two attributes are required of people settling in any place that is new to them, they were perhaps *essential* to people settling on the prairies: rampant hope and imagination were perhaps major factors in keeping settlers on the land through periods of considerable adversity. The legendary drought of the "dirty thirties," the setting for the novel, was by no means the first drought in the history of European settlement on the prairies.³ The little man's humourous but also poignant last word

³ Captain John Palliser arrived at his conclusion that the semi-arid prairies would not support settlement after having moved his survey expedition through the prairies in

understates his disappointment in the prairie garden as it understates his veiled optimism. Heartburn is an apt metaphor. Although heartburn creates significant discomfort, it is not lasting. The analogy reveals the little man's hope that the drought, also, will pass.

After his anecdote of the little man is interrupted by the arrival of Brian's father, Sean concludes his narrative, albeit now revised for an adult hearing. In the interim, the novel's omniscient narrator's comment offers insight:

Sean's mind went back to the afternoon when he had stood on the edge of his south forty acres of wheat burnt brown before its time . . . In the course of the drought years Sean had changed from a bewildered man watching the winds lick up the top soil from his land, to a man with a message. (21)

Ultimately, Sean's message is that there are alternate ways of existing in the prairie Eden—ways more amenable to both people and the land. It is very much a question of knowledge he could share if only others would listen. He rants to his brother,

Plant yer crops, I tell 'em, in strips accrost 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 . . .raise some pigs
an' cattle too. Fergit yer goddam little red tractors an'

1858-59—during a drought. (cf. Lemmen and Vance, and Nemanishen on climate and drought in Palliser's Triangle.)

yer goddam yella wheeled cars an' yer trips to Washington
an' California an' Oregon! (21)

Sean's message gestures toward a relatively immediate and practical solution to the problem of drifting soil, on the one hand, while on the other hand, it alludes to a more insidious moral problem—greed. Sean's message turns on a theology predicated not only on doing what is right but also doing it for the right reason.

In Mitchell's prairie version of the Garden of Eden, Brian is the "innocent."⁴ He is a thoughtful child through whose senses we come to see an Eden that exists not after the fact of the Fall, *that is*, lost, but an Eden that exists in accordance with what God had in mind with the creation of man in the first place. Sean's narratives serve to remind us that the express purpose of that creation was "to dress and keep" the garden (Genesis 2.15) in which humans and nature are together defined by, and defining of, each other. As the gardener defines a garden, so a garden defines the gardener. Moreover, Sean passes on to Brian the vocation of stewardship, in part, in his parodic biblical-cum-

⁴ Mariel Abercrombie, conspiring to keep her classmates and friends from Tang Wong's birthday party, and Artie, snapping the tail off the living gopher, like the actions of Wallace Stegner's "little savages" in *Wolf Willow*, invite examination. These incidents bring to mind Stegner's recalled childhood and his observation that there was a snake in the garden—one represented by acts of prejudice and mean-spiritedness to the point of sadism. If anything, Artie, or Ike as he is later called, and Mariel Abercrombie would be the characters who model what Stegner euphemistically refers to as the snake in the garden.

prairie garden narrative that, like Saint Sammy's narrative, comprises an "in the beginning" account of the prairie garden—from the prairie story-teller's point of view.

Adam, and likewise Sean, and perhaps Brian in his footsteps, are keepers of gardens in which humankind and nature take part in a symbiotic relationship. The point is worth drawing out because the symbiotic nature of the relationship between Mitchell's central characters and the land differs markedly from the combative nature of the relationship between characters and the land in the work of other prairie writers, whose works have led such literary theorists as Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, Lawrence Ricou, Dick Harrison, and Diane Quantic to claim that the land and attributes of it variously dwarf, isolate, brutalize, drive insane, drive to death, or drive out, those who live on it. Consider Quantic's observation in her book, *The Nature of the Place*, for instance, that "great Plains fiction "is rife with examples of people transformed by their encounter with the land. Often they go mad" (9).

The critical observations that the prairie land is the silent aggressor, the agent of disaster and ruin, are not without foundation. They stem from "realist" writing and prairie writers' tendencies to anthropomorphize the wind, or other elements, for example, as Sinclair Ross does in *As For Me and My House*. They stem as well from the writers' tendencies to exploit the rhetoric of violence and aggression in keeping with their time in which

characters "do battle" with the prairie environment that they perceive to be actively engaged in persecuting them.⁵

Certainly, in Mitchell's novel, characters are dwarfed by the enormity of the conditions of the prairie drought, the results of which, for example, bring into question Saint Sammy's sanity, The Ben's eccentric existence, and even Sean's perspective on life. On the other hand, the wind, with a little timely help from Saint Sammy's prognostication brings the opportunistic Bent Candy to his knees. In *Who Has Seen the Wind*, however, the aggressor is neither particularly the prairie land nor its environment. Other agents of destruction are human and mechanical. They are, in Sean's words, the "stubble-jumpin' sons a hunyacks" (26), such as Bent Candy, "the caterpillar man" (131) and "profaner of almost a township of flat loam" (131), whom Sean accuses of worshipping "the hot bitch Goddess a prophet" while riding a "jigglin' little black tractor over the land, jigglin'" his "little black soul" (226). It is Candy's outright rejection of Sean's proposal for an irrigation scheme that draws Sean's escalating ire in the first place. Moreover, Candy's repeated response, "Ain't int'rested" (226), shows him to be as indifferent to the needs of the land and the people in the prairie garden as Sean is passionate about these things. Fuelling Sean's anger as well is that fact that Candy's is the final refusal of a scheme that rests within Sean's proprietary

⁵ Consider Anne Marriott's long poem "The Wind Our Enemy" (1939), for one.

obligation to "dress" and "keep" God's garden (Genesis 2.15)—the obligation that figures him, as "keeper of the Lord's vineyard" (21), as an Adam-like innocent as well.

In Adam-like innocence, Brian asks questions of himself and others, thus actively engaging in Adamic acts of discovery, naming, and gathering knowledge of the place in which he lives. These acts necessarily replicate the actions of the first man in the Biblical garden in moving through a series of "first" discoveries. For instance, it is essentially curiosity and the intrigue of the "deliciously strange" unknown (13) that first takes Brian into the prairie. His observations comprise, among others, a list of the sounds therein: "the stitching sound of grasshoppers . . . the meadow lark's song" (13); the gopher's squeak; the wind's "pervasive sighing" (14).

In *Another Time*, Eli Mandel draws attention to "firsts:" the first place, the first vision of things, the first clarity of things (50). Brian O'Connell moves through a series of "firsts" that he demonstrates, in part, by means of asking questions driven by means of his sensitive awareness of the world around him. The answers Brian derives from his questions support the claim that he is an innocent in the garden, but the treatment he receives when he raises the questions, reveal that some of the characters in the novel are innocents-by-degree as well. As has been previously noted, the characters who inform this sensitive child—among them Uncle Sean, Reverend. Hislop, Saint Sammy, and Brian's Grandmother, even as adults—are also "innocents" to some

extent. For instance, when Brian asks Hislop about God, the minister's response brings God from the heaven of Brian's conception and grounds Him in the prairie. "There's sunshine and it's blue, and Heaven is where God is," Hislop tells the boy (26). Brian, who repeatedly demonstrates his awareness of the prairie, would associate sunshine and blue with it. Hislop's telling the boy that sunshine and blue comprise heaven is tantamount to telling him that the prairie is heaven. The minister reveals a sense of wonder reminiscent of Brian's when the boy first heard "the stitching sound of the grasshoppers, the sudden relief of a meadow lark's song . . . (so) deliciously strange . . ." (13). Hislop tells Brian God

makes meadow larks sing. If an ant climbs a grass blade—a-grasshopper spits tobacco juice—that's God."

"Spiders and buffalo beans?"

When a butterfly winks his wings—that's God too," said Hislop. "Ladybugs, kittens, pups, gophers, they're all—"

"Trees—trees—does He do trees?"

". . . .-birth-death-towns-prairies and tumble weeds.

(27)

Hislop here uses simple child-like speech, and proposes an earthy God with a distinctive prairie presence—in images that appeal to the child's growing fascination with the prairie. The unlikely image of God as the grasshopper spitting tobacco juice serves equally to assert the presence of the sacred into the profane, and vice versa.

But as much as the grasshopper is somewhat humanized, in that it is a tobacco-spitting inhabitant of the natural prairie garden, conversely, Sean is somewhat naturalized as a tobacco juice-spitting inhabitant of the prairie garden as well. On the one hand, Sean does not exhibit the unflattering laziness attributed to the grasshopper, say, in folk tales. But on the other hand, as a representative of prairie farmers, whose ploughs have destroyed the natural habitat, Sean wreaks as much havoc on the natural prairie garden as the grasshoppers wreak on the agriculturalised space. Sean, by dint of being a farmer, destroys indigenous plants in order to prepare space for cultivated plants. In short, humans and grasshoppers are both destructive of the garden that effectively becomes space contested by flora, fauna, and human alike.

As Sean is somewhat naturalized by dint of association with the grasshopper, so are several other characters naturalized in the prairie garden. The Ben, who is associated with hawks or owls, and the Young Ben, who is repeatedly associated with the coyote, are also relatively natural creatures in the garden, something Brian understands from the first time he sees the Young Ben. Is God "the boy on the prairie" (27), Brian asks Hislop, who answers "Yes—I—God made him," and Brian continues, "the boy has—I wish I had prairie hair. He has the wind on him all the time . . . " (27). And here, as in the beginning of the novel, is the fusing of the Godhead, the wind, and the innocent in the garden.

Hislop's version of creation in the prairie garden is deceptively simple. On the one hand, the knowledge he imparts to the boy overtly supports the child's uncomplicated understanding of God as inseparable from the prairie Eden he is engaged in discovering. Although Hislop is not telling a creation story *per se*, he is, in his own way, expanding the traditional narrative of the garden of creation to include the prairie garden. The importance of the inclusion of the prairie as part of the Ur-narrative is the quiet assertion of the value of this garden, notwithstanding its decline in monetary value in the on-going drought. Brian's meeting with the minister, as well as the narrative of the little man of Sean's tale, have considerable bearing on the little man-God that Brian brings into existence as an imaginary playmate—one who has particular attributes in common with other people, or stories of other people in Brian's life, real and imagined.

In one of the grandmother's stories, for instance, she tells her grandson that his grandfather was "a fine man . . . with a rabbit's foot fob to his watch, flair for the fiddle and a way with horses" (203). Interestingly, the grandfather and the little man in Sean's story, as well as the little man-god of Brian's creation, each wear a pocket watch with a rabbit's foot fob. The rabbit's foot fob appears to be an incidental detail in the description of two characters in narratives-within-the narrative of the novel. But Sean's little man is part of family lore, as is the narrative of Brian's grandfather by the

grandmother, whose construction of him calls to mind Sean's little man and other legendary characters from traditional folk tales. Moreover, Mitchell's little man evokes other imaginary literary characters, among them, Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit. The grandmother, in her tales, constructs her husband as a character closely connected to the world of birds and animals in an oral version of a pastoral prairie place. Her recall of the horse and sound of the anvil together suggest an ordered place in which industrious humans remain sensitive of and responsive to the natural world around them. Given that the sounds of the prairie were what first drew him into it, it is interesting that Brian's grandmother's description of the prairie has strong auditory, as opposed to visual, appeal. In the grandmother's telling, Brian's grandfather could "fiddle the squeak of a gopher lost in wind whispering through prairie grass, crows calling, an anvil on a winter day, an ant pile broken open and the ants all scurrying round. She'd heard him fiddle jack rabbits bouncing off, a goshawk drifting high with a field mouse in its claws, a flock of geese and all their necks . . . " (203).

Mrs. MacMurray describes her late husband for his grandsons in prairie terms. It is Mr. MacMurray's fiddle—a traditional folk instrument—not a violin representative of "high art" and, therefore considered contrived and "unnatural" in its soundings—that represents the voice the gopher, crows, and the whisper to the wind, and ultimately gives voice to the prairie. The instrumental replication of the voices, the

transmogrification of the ants (scurrying), the jack rabbits (bouncing), and the hawk's (drifting) to the voice of Mr. MacMurray's fiddle collectively serve to underscore in the text the importance of not just orality, but aurality. Like Sean and Hislop, Mrs. MacMurray's version of the garden includes the gopher, but she also includes the animals of the natural worlds in her stories. The listing of names amounting to an Adamic act on her part, evokes Eden—indeed, at the time she is recalling, that is, her own early "first" experience on the prairie, the birds and animals would all have been new to her.

Herself being the first-generation ancestor on the prairie, the grandmother reveals in her narratives of ancestral history a version of place that informs and supports Brian's own. More importantly, however, her anecdotes are likely to have drawn the child into his aural awareness of the prairie in the first place. Strictly speaking, Mrs. MacMurray here tells the narrative of the grandfather and his fiddle to Bobbie rather than to Brian—but Bobbie's request for the story about the bob-cat suggests that she tells some of her stories repeatedly: these are family stories that contribute to the family's knowledge of their more recent ancestral past as well as the more immediate history of place. In other words, in her narratives she creates for her grandsons the grandfather they never knew, and a sense that the abundant prairie world in which he lived becomes, in part, theirs as well.

When he constructs his little man god—the vacuum cleaner-riding R.W. God, BVD—Brian begins to emerge as a story-teller himself, bestowing upon his characters in imagination the memorable attributes of characters in other imaginative narratives he has heard, his grandmother's included (to wit the detail of the watch with the rabbit's foot fob). Brian displays potential as an imaginative story-teller in the family tradition, but as a story-teller with strong ties to the natural world, when he sits "under the table at the window, imagining himself as an ant deep in a dark cave" (4) and envisioning the world accordingly. "Ants, he had decided, saw things tiny and glass-coloured" (4). He endows himself with vision, perception, and independent knowledge outside the adult world, disclaiming the need to have someone to play with him, "now that he [is] an ant" (4). In this instance, the boy has "become" an ant, and, therefore, found a place in the natural world. Besides being imaginative and creative, this young boy's intelligent sensitivity bordering on precocity drives the whole novel in which imaginative anecdotal narratives, traditional tales, and history as they relate to the prairie garden, are major concerns.

History, anecdote, and traditional tale all figure in Brian's grandmother narratives, some of which she speaks aloud to her family, and some of which she reviews in silence—thinking them over to herself. Thus, sound and sight become the servants of the old lady's memory as she listens "to the August breeze in the poplar's leaves just outside the window" (201). Living in

time conflated by her gradual retreat into the sanctuary of her upstairs room, the grandmother is here telling herself a story, finding soothing the construction of her own in-the-beginning account of her arrival in the (new) world where she and her husband lived out a version of the Adam and Eve story in a prairie Garden of Eden—homesteaders on a quarter-section of land on the Saskatchewan prairie. Mrs. MacMurray provides in one tale an image of the farmstead characteristic of early settlers, the details of her story revealing evidence of this Adam and Eve's first attempts to build shelter for themselves and, thereby, put down roots in the prairie garden. Having made their claim to land, they literally begin living on and in the very sod of the prairie garden.⁶

As in her earlier narrative about the fiddle, the grandmother's tale reveals something more. Her attitude is essentially predicated on notions related to the natural prairie garden. Her narratives subtly indicate Mrs. MacMurray's sensitivity to homesteaders being interlopers, intruders (some would suggest proverbial snakes) in the garden: "The bob-cat kept right on setting there staring like John shouldn't be there" (295), she tells her grandsons. Mrs. MacMurray's narratives about the tame

⁶ Lumber for building houses only became relatively available after the railroad crossed the west c. 1910. Mrs. MacMurray's comment suggests that when they arrived trees suitable for building a house were perhaps either not available or not accessible. (For a discussion about homesteads and shelter, see Rees.)

failure of prairie place. Indeed, from the writing of critics (among them Dick Harrison, Lawrence Ricou, and the geographer, Ronald Rees) arises the narrative that failures in the prairie place, indeed the failure of the garden dream, was, in large part, due to the failure of the in-comers to adapt to the new place. I would argue, rather, the success of the garden dream, proven by the inclusion of a composite primordial prairie narrative in the tradition of the original garden story. Therein rests evidence of successful adaptation to place predicated on, and no-less sustained by, hope and imagination.

The narrative of her own life is the central concern of Hagar Shipley in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. Looking at this character through the lens of a garden provides a view of a character whose life in all its ambiguity serves as metaphor for the similarly ambiguous prairie place in which she lives. The garden may seem an unlikely lens through which to view a character for whom gardens initially appear to have little significance, but in *The Stone Angel*, the flowers symbolic of the garden demonstrate the importance of beauty and grace in a world of contraries which collide.

Chapter Three

A Measure of Gracefulness:

Stone Angel in the Prairie Garden

In his book *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx notes the use of the garden "to represent the sufficiency of nature in its organic state" and convey "an impulse-centered, anarchic or primitivistic view of life" (43). Marx goes on to say that "elsewhere, the garden stands for a state of cultivation, hence a less exalted estimate of nature's beneficence" (43). The observation could have been written expressly in response to the notion of garden that remains constant in Margaret Laurence's novel, *The Stone Angel*. The Manawaka cemetery garden, with its stone monument to the dead mother, provides a gravitational centre for Hagar (Currie) Shipley, the motherless child in the novel. In that cemetery garden, in the shadow of the stone angel representative of the mother who "saved her death" (59) for her youngest child, Hagar is informed and inscribed by various narratives of the prairie past that demonstrate the tension between the garden representative of nature in its organic state and the garden representative of nature in a state of cultivation.

Hagar's narrative begins with the coincidence of her birth and her mother's death, and continues with Hagar's retrospective construction of her own life, first recalled as a young girl in the cemetery garden. The image of the stone angel whom Hagar

resembles in metaphoric blindness and rigidity of character—in combination with overtones of death and the cemetery garden in the context of a larger surrounding prairie garden throughout the novel—suggests that Hagar's narrative is a story of origin with ties to the traditional story of origin in The Book of Genesis.

As Genesis is a narrative of the past set on both sides of the biblical garden wall, so is Laurence's novel in part a narrative of the prairie past set on both sides of the prairie cemetery garden wall as Hagar constructs a past shaped and determined by the retrospective narrative of the almost forty years she spent living there. A fence marking the "cemetery limits" (18) provides physical enclosure for the graveyard and delineates it from the larger prairie surround. As much as the cemetery garden is physically bound by having been constructed as a garden for the dead, it is psychologically and imaginatively enclosed as well by cultural notions of death held by the keepers of the garden, that is, relatives and friends who tend to the dead therein. The garden itself, however, is designed for the dead as well as for the living, to whom the space designated as garden offers healing and emotional respite. In this respect, the cemetery garden is space needed by both the living and the dead, in imagination and in "real" life.

Like the biblical garden, the Manawaka cemetery is both sanctified ground and space. For instance, whereas the cultivated space of the garden, where peonies grow and impose their lingering scent, is the place where the natural "coarse

couchgrass" (5) grows with its "fleeting" (5) scent as well. Consider the implication of the contemporary change in the prairie garden, suggested in the lingering scent of cultivated plants in relation to the "fleeting" (5) scent of the indigenous plants. The plants are a metonym for the prairie garden in transition from indigenous to cultivated. Part natural prairie (the fence that marks its borders fails to deter indigenous plants), and part cultivated garden (with paths, imported plants, and statuary); part sanctuary for the living, and part "habitations of the dead" (5), the cemetery is also an imagined and actual manifestation of the past and present brought together in the garden. Hagar's mention of delphiniums and cornflowers with their vibrant blues, for instance, echoes the reference to a peacock in the cemetery garden and Hagar's description of herself. "There was I," she recalls, "strutting the board sidewalk like a pint-sized peacock, resplendent, haughty, hoity-toity, Jason Currie's black-haired daughter" (6). The image of the peacock in the garden serves not just to demonstrate a little girl's pleasure and pride in a new outfit; it serves as well to further extend the link between the new Manawaka cemetery garden with its new statuary and its ancestral European place. From gardens and cemeteries stem constant reminders of life and death. Bodies and seeds are both buried in the earth—planted; bodies in their burial contributing to the organic matter around them; seeds in their burial generating new life.

The notion of the prairie as garden in the novel begins with the subtle suggestion that the Manawaka cemetery and, by extension, the prairie space surrounding it, comprise versions of the Garden of Eden. Although most of Hagar's narrative takes place outside what we commonly think of as garden—a plot specifically dedicated to the growing of produce for domestic or commercial purposes, or for aesthetic reasons, her reference to flowers leads us to the notion of the larger prairie as a variation on Eden—in other words, as garden.

The notion of the Manawaka cemetery as garden derives initially from Hagar's description of attempts to convert a patch of prairie into civilized "habitations of the dead" (5) by "loving relatives determined to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized" (5). The implication is that the indigenous prairie garden must be civilized in order to be an appropriate habitation for the dead. Corollary to that is the notion that the relatives of the dead have succeeded in civilizing the garden to the extent that weeds and disorder are somewhat under control. Consider Hagar's comment that

There could not have been many places to walk primly in those days, on paths, where white kid boots and dangling skirts would not be torn by thistles or put in unseemly disarray." (4-5)

The implication is that the cemetery is an acceptable place for a little girl to be. Hagar continues to go to her garden as she gets older. On one level, whether she recognizes it, her even

being in the cemetery garden gives her a degree of proximity to the representative angel she obviously dislikes. To a young child, the notions of the mother and the angel would be imaginatively inseparable. Her mention of paths, "planted peonies" (4), and statuary heralding the European cultural past affirm the notion of fledgling civilization in the new prairie place. On the one hand the statuary in the garden—the Italian marble angel, or the cherub strumming "upon a small stone stringless harp" (4) —belongs to the conventions of "civilized" European place dating back to the Romans' marble sculpture and mosaics depicting Orpheus and his lyre. The statuary and the planted peonies affirm the notion of the garden as a civilized place with a long ancestral past, a notion at least as old as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, for example, c. 600 BC.

The cemetery has other attributes of the garden as well: solitude and sanctuary. It provides the young Hagar a place to be alone, a place "to read and get away from the boys" (17), and even a place to hide—behind a chokecherry bush, at the hill's edge, just outside the fence that marked the cemetery limits (18). The chokecherry bush echoes faintly the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden in that it figures in a degree of transgression when Hagar becomes an inadvertent witness to her father as he propositions "No-Name Lottie Dreiser's mother" (18). Strictly speaking, the chokecherry bush is not *in* the cemetery-garden, and strictly speaking, there is no transgression on the part of Lottie's mother as she turns down the proposition. But

the suggestion of transgression is nonetheless present. Unlike Eve in Genesis, Lottie's mother did not succumb to a wily seducer in the first place—"I loved him" (18), she says of another lover who was perhaps Lottie's father—and neither does she fall victim to Jason's wiles nor to his unconcealed and intimidating anger. Given that we are here arguing the sensibility of a garden, the actual location of the chokecherry bush is a moot point. The chokecherry bush does grow in the larger prairie garden that, as I argue, also comprises a version of Eden in this text.

Although on the one hand Laurence's garden represents European civilization, on the other hand, the garden also bespeaks the less documented, less visible prairie civilization from a relatively more recent prairie past. Hagar writes of the garden that

for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint musky dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown there always, before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree with enigmatic faces and greasy hair. (5)

Even as a child, she is evidently aware of the prairie past eroding in the presence of the newcomers and their modifications of the prairie place. The flowers Hagar names in the cemetery garden further serve to demonstrate her sense of the tensions between the two civilizations—new and old. The indigenous

cowslips and imported and cultivated peonies grow side by side-in / on common ground.

The flowers serve as a metaphor for Hagar herself, who has been "cultivated" by her father in that she bears his Scottish Anglo-European genetic and cultural ancestry. Indeed, as Fiona Sparrow notes, "Hagar touches on the civilizing power of flowers" (29) in the cemetery garden and in the agricultural prairie garden beyond. Sparrow notes, for instance, Hagar's recall of the scent of the lilacs overpowering the odour of the "yellowed ammonia pools where the horses emptied themselves" (29) in the yard of the Shipley place. To be "civilized" is to smell flowers, not urine.

Neither the Shipley place nor the Manawaka cemetery garden, for that matter, appear to be particularly Edenic. In contrast to the common notion of the Garden of Eden, in the prairie garden, thorns and thistles grow inside, not outside the garden wall. In Christian theology, the belief is that, in the beginning, God created the world and every living thing within it. By extension, then, in the harmonious Garden of Eden, all living things must have been compatible. I propose that garden is garden, so-designated by the naming of the space in which things grow, and that prairie space—natural or cultivated for specific agricultural purpose—is as much garden as space otherwise and more commonly understood to be garden, that is, space that is planted for smaller domestic and / or aesthetic reasons.

The garden of Genesis was new, and for the narrator of *The Stone Angel*, the prairie garden is "new" as well. Hagar affirms the sense of new place that, for newcomers in the area amounts to a new world on psychological, imaginative, cultural, and physically geographic planes. For instance, the earliest date on a stone in the Manawaka cemetery, 1870, approximately coincides with the founding of the town, the creation of the garden, and the year of Hagar's birth—each representative of new beginning. Some of the first plantings in new settlements were burials. Plantings of the dead, then, were followed by horticultural plantings that refigured the natural prairie garden for aesthetic and cultural reasons. However the space might have been named—plain, prairie, field, or farmland. It becomes a version of garden by dint of re-appropriation of space and new plantings of bodies as well as domestic, rather than indigenous, plants.

In *The Stone Angel*, the naming of the characters alone places the novel in the context of the Ur-narrative of the original garden story. Laurence's naming invites comparison of Hagar and her husband Bram with their biblical namesakes and the stories surrounding them. Hagar and Bram are no Adam and Eve, but they share their names with other characters from the book of Genesis. As Sandra Djwa observes, many of the characters in Laurence's writing are "often identified with the central concerns of Biblical prototypes" (45). Djwa also notes that Laurence's characters "are most often related mythically as are Abraham, Hagar, Jacob and Ishmael" (49). The connections to the

biblical characters are varied. Bram, for instance, is the diminutive form of Abraham, the first patriarch of the Hebrew people. The biblical Hagar is the servant girl who produced for Abraham a son with whom she was eventually cast out into the wilderness.

Consider Hagar in relation to Abraham, Jacob, Job, and Ishmael, and the cautionary biblical tales of human suffering and pain through alienation, loss, stolen birthrights, and the need of blessing. For instance, when Hagar and her younger son leave Bram, their leaving echoes the biblical Hagar who flees into the wilderness to be found beside a spring by an angel of the Lord (Genesis 16:3). When Hagar runs away to Shadow Point to avoid going to a nursing home, she is found by a proverbial angel of the Lord in the form of her rescuer, the evangelizing Murray Ferney Lees. In the novel, Hagar's wilderness, as Sandra Djwa names it, is her "emotional wilderness" (45). Hagar's attempt to leave it by moving west, however, only results in a change of venue in that Hagar finds a different emotional wilderness in the new place—one she constructs with lies about her past, for example, passing herself off as a widow long before Bram dies.

Hagar's favouring of one son over the other echoes the biblical tale of the birthright wrongly given in the story of Jacob and Esau. As Djwa points out "the two covenants of Jacob and Hagar . . . are fused and telescoped with suggestions of the Jacob-Esau story of birthright" (47). Each of Hagar's sons, in turn, becomes a Jacob figure to her: John, when he wrestles with

the fallen stone angel in the cemetery (39), and Marvin, when he struggles to hoist a different fallen stone angel—Hagar—to her feet (253). As Djwa puts it, "Hagar at last sees that it is her first son Marvin who is really the Jacob figure in what she has come to recognize as the allegory of her life" (47). Hagar herself makes the connection between her sons and wrestling with the angel. "Now, it seems to me he [Marvin] really is Jacob" (304), she reflects. Like Job, Hagar's trials are many.

Besides struggling in emotional wilderness like her biblical namesake, she suffers like Job, as well—suffering alienation from her father and her sons and from Bram, whose love for her and hers for him she simply misunderstands. She suffers the deaths of those whom she loves best as well as the death of the mother she never knew. Like Hagar, the biblical characters struggle with, and no less stumble over, their own willfulness and pride on both sides of the biblical walled garden. The biblical characters are in exile in the wilderness that God consigns to humanity for all time. Hagar is in exile in metaphoric wilderness for all time that, for her, is the duration of her life. My reading of the novel as a garden narrative differs from literary critics (among them: Sandra Djwa, Patricia Köster, Clara Thomas, and David Williams) who have examined at length the various connections between Laurence's novel and the Bible. Although these critics have noted the influence of the Old Testament narratives in the novel and examined the characters in relation to the biblical narratives, they have neither provided a

reading of the prairie as a garden, nor have they explored the relationship of the prairie garden to the most well-known garden in Western literary tradition—the Garden of Eden.

Flowers in the novel forge one of the major connections between the Garden of Eden and the prairie garden. As Clara Thomas observes in "The Wild Garden and the Manawaka World," the continuity of the garden metaphor is assured in Laurence's texts "by scores of flower references which form a part of the language-fabric" in the text (411). W. H. New, in the introduction to the 1968 edition of *The Stone Angel*, also notes the connection between Hagar and flowers. New's comment draws attention to another dichotomy: the ambiguity of a sense of fertility derived from Hagar's allusion to flowers, on the one hand, and the arid emotional and physical environment within the prairie garden. New observes that "In her rage for life Hagar is partial to flowers, but the prairie is dry, the houses are grey, and the flowers that are around her are always the lilac and lily-of-the-valley, spring flowers that are associated with death and with funerals" (ix). New's point is well-taken, but as Thomas suggests, there is considerably more to the use of these flowers than their associations with death and funerals. If the flowers maintain a current of contradiction centered on nature in its organic state as opposed to nature in its cultivated state, as I have noted earlier, they also serve to maintain the current of contradiction initially proposed in the narrative of the Garden

of Eden that has become part of the tradition of writing the garden in literature.

Out of the garden story comes the first ambiguous narrative of estrangement, a narrative that straddles both sides of the (walled) Garden of Eden. In *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, the expansive version of the meta-narrative of the garden, Milton constructs the first two incidents of discord (estrangement) in the world. The estrangement in itself is unambiguous. Adam and Eve are escorted out of the Garden of Eden, and guards stand watch at the gates to prevent their return. I propose that ambiguity rests in the entire garden narrative. Consider a hitherto benevolent God becoming sufficiently angry with the humans of his own creation, to whom He has given free will, barring them from His presence in the garden, essentially because they exercise it. In the first of the incidents that take place in the garden, Adam becomes angry with Eve when she offers him fruit from the Tree of Knowledge that the serpent has effectively cajoled, inveigled, and finally, seduced her into eating. The first estrangement of humans from each other is followed by their estrangement from God. Subsequent stories of estrangement, the generative narrative of the Bible—humankind's estrangement from God—continue generationally. Further ambiguity is inherent in the humans' response to being put out of the garden. Their transgression, which results in the pain of estrangement from God, also results in the acquisition of knowledge, and ultimately leads to their independence in a new world in which restrictions are not the product of a higher

authority, but rather are governed by their own physical and imaginative limitations. Hagar, in her metaphoric emotional exile, to some extent, follows the path of biblical exiles, initially striking out on her own in defiance of her father—the model for her own independence. I propose that, even if there were no references to garden in *The Stone Angel*, the narrative of estrangement and Hagar's longing for reconciliation with nature is in itself sufficient to suggest a version of the traditional garden story. The narrator's preference for natural beauty indicates her desire to feel that she is a part of the natural world at the same time as her inability to fully embrace the natural stands in the way of her happiness in that natural world.

The cemetery garden serves as a reminder of the natural world to which, as well as in which, death and life are inevitably linked. In her life-long narrative, for instance, Hagar only gradually comes to accept death as part of life, and, ironically, when she does, she herself dies. In Hagar's view, death is a fatal flaw in character: to her, death represents weakness, surrendered strength, and lack of will. As Christian Riegel observes, in Hagar's view, the stone angel that marks her mother's gravesite "is also a marker of physical weakness" (25). And Riegel continues, "Hagar is the survivor, while the . . . figures she remembers, died prematurely as a consequence of their physical weakness" (23). In her anecdote about the death of her brother Dan, Hagar reveals her feeling that weakness was the fatal failing that contributed to the deaths of both her mother

and the son said to resemble her. "All I could think of," she says in response to Matt's request to put on her dead mother's shawl, "was that meek woman I'd never seen . . . from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not but detest . . ." (25). As much as the deaths fuel Hagar's determination to be strong and reject death on the one hand, on the other hand, the utter rejection of frailty—whether in petunias or people—amounts to a denial of an essential part of life—death itself. Life and death form an inter-dependent dichotomy. There has to be life in order for there to be death, and vice versa. It follows then, that the rejection of death amounts to a partial rejection of life, and by extension, a rejection of nature.

Clara Thomas observes that the "dichotomy of man and nature . . . is basic" (178) to Margaret Laurence's writing—an observation justified by the description of the cemetery alone, with its planted peonies and wild cowslips. The dichotomy is clear, as well, for example, in Hagar's preference for silk over man-made materials, or more dramatically, in Hagar's choice, the "unrefined" and earthy Bram as her husband rather than the more refined and cultured men her father had in mind. Dennis Cooley also remarks on the dichotomy introduced and exemplified in the Manawaka cemetery garden. In an essay on art and nature in *The Stone Angel*, Cooley writes:

In the cemetery passage Laurence raises a series of alternatives that will figure throughout the rest of the book. She opposes what is foreign to what is native, what

is imposed to what is discovered, what is artificial and refined to what is natural and forthright. (25)

Hagar's preference for the indigenous and scented cowslips, for instance—"tough rooted . . . wild and gaudy flowers" (5)—as opposed to the planted peonies with their smothering "funeral parlour perfume" (5) provides an example of her preference for the organic over the cultivated, the poles she is torn between throughout her narrative. Her marriage provides perhaps the most obvious demonstration of Hagar's attraction to the organic or natural world. Cast as a version of a traditional literary rustic, Bram, with his "crescents of ingrown earth under his fingernails" (45) and "black hair thrusting from his skin . . . rough as thistles" (45), is a figure of nature whose earthiness is Hagar's delight. As the comparison of his beard to thistles indicates, in terms of the garden, Bram would clearly be considered a weed with more affinity to cowslips than cultivated peonies. Interestingly, Hagar's recognition of Bram's connection to the prairie garden is affirmed by both her father and by Lottie, whose condemnation also aligns Bram with the garden and the natural world. In their opinions, Bram is "common as dirt" (47, 48). Hagar, however, takes Bram's connection with nature for an asset and not a liability, and marries Bram, at least partially, out of rebellious defiance.

Bram's connection with the soil notwithstanding, his dreams reside elsewhere. When he tells Hagar, "It'll be worth looking at someday, that place of mine" (47), his dreams of success are

pinned on breeding horses rather than on gardening the large agricultural prairie garden. Although he did not cash in on the record-breaking wheat yields prior to the drought of 1919, because by then he was trying to establish himself with horses, it was his own success in the agricultural garden prior to the drought that provided him the means to begin to act upon the dream.

In the Manawaka area the successful farmers are essentially gardeners who, to some extent, are living out their own garden dreams. Bram compares unfavourably with other district farmers because of his failure to meet their expectations and make his homestead flourish in the river valley on the outskirts of town.

Fiona Sparrow writes that British settlers [which family names in the novel largely indicate Bram and his neighbours to be] envisioned themselves as gardeners in a new Eden. Sparrow writes: "Ever since their expulsion from that garden, the descendents of Adam and Eve have striven to recreate it" (24). Moreover, Sparrow continues, "The British settlers in Canada saw themselves as gardeners in a wilderness, as untouched as God's newly created world" (24). If the settlers saw themselves as gardeners, then it follows that they would have had to recast the space they might actually have seen as wilderness, at least imaginatively, as garden—the notion of wilderness being incompatible with the role of the gardener, and the notion of gardener being likewise incompatible with wilderness. Sparrow draws attention to the dilemma that the historical settlers faced

in defining both themselves and the prairie space they occupied—a dilemma arising in no small part out of cultural inscriptions and inherent expectations. Sparrow would perhaps concur with cultural geographer Ronald Rees, who addresses some of the homesteaders' dreams. Bram, with his dreams, represents a generation of homesteaders on the prairies the farmers, whom Rees claims "brought to Western Canada . . . the vision of the garden plot" (136). Rees here refers to cultural inscription, knowledge, and experience of the place(s) left behind, that newcomers imaginatively transfer to the new place. Bram does what is necessary to register his place as a homestead and clearly realizes that part of his dream, but, in Hagar's telling at least, he does not adhere to the larger vision of finding his Eden in the development of the prairie garden. Not sharing the dream thought to have been held by farming homesteaders, however, does not imply the absence of dream. Bram's dream simply centers on the use of his land for horses rather than for farming grain. His dream indicates what he values—a more natural way of life that affords him more time to do what he wants to do in the prairie garden, rather than what he would have to do if he were to use his land as his neighbours use theirs.

However, part of the information that served in the construction of the romantic dream and vision of which Rees speaks in relation to British settlers was also North American in origin. Canadian immigration literature contributed to the narrative of the west as a land of opportunity on both sides of

the Atlantic ocean. As R. Douglas Francis notes in *Images of the West*, "to every immigrant the West was the promised land" (109). The euphemistic naming of the prairie west as the "promised land," that is, the Garden of Eden, served to strengthen the image of the space as garden just as images of abundant wheat fields in the agricultural prairie garden bolstered the image of the space as the promised land. Francis writes that, like Eden, the settlers' west "had no past, only a present and a better future" (726). The notion of a present without a past, and a better future implies new beginnings.

Corollary to being new is being first: sometimes being first in a new world comes from having moved into new space. More important, however, is the perception of being first. Hagar's perception of new would perhaps have been shared by some of the historical settlers. As Hagar remarks, "For a while you believe you carry nothing with you—all is cancelled from before, or cauterized, and you begin again and nothing will go wrong this time" (155). In *The Stone Angel*, as Hagar comes to discover, things go wrong as much in the past as they do in the present. Considering that, at about ninety years of age, Hagar might be expected to be putting her house in order, it comes as no surprise that she reviews the events that took place over the course of her lifetime.

Given her struggles with emotional exile throughout her life, it is interesting that the period of the nineteen-thirties has considerable prominence in Hagar's narrative. Part of the

reason for the prominence resides in the emotional trauma she suffers in losing her husband, Bram, and her favourite son, John. The two tragedies (in addition to the absence of the mother) plunge Hagar further into the emotional drought that forges a symbolic connection to the drought of the land itself. Hagar's leaving the prairie coincides with the end of the Great War and a severe prairie drought—1918-1919.¹ Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* provides a narrative of life in the failed garden that serves to affirm the conditions that Bram and Hagar endured on the "never lucky" Shipley place (29). However, more to the point than the historical evidence of drought surrounding Laurence's narrative is the subtle implication of enduring hardship that pressed people's economic and emotional resources to the limit. In point of fact, the conditions that led people to leave their homesteads also ultimately led to Hagar leaving Bram.

Consider the companion descriptions of Hagar and Bram in their ill-fitting, hand-me-down overcoats. The image in part provides evidence of the prairie malaise caused by the failure of the garden. The overcoats signal hardship without reference to the underlying problem—the failure of the garden, and the lack of resources as a result. Further testimony to the Shipleys' lack of resources comes to light in incidents that took place in town. For example, Hagar recalls herself begging for credit in the

¹ In the years 1916-1918, the productivity of the prairie garden was in serious decline. For historical information about the most severe prairie drought on the prairies since the settlement of the region, see Walter Nemanishen's *Drought in the Palliser Triangle*.

store that once belonged to her father; Bram arguing over stale donuts; and the clerk's refusal to sell Bram lemon extract for fear of him selling it in the street (which he does). These anecdotes serve to deflect attention from their primary cause, that is, the inability of the prairie garden to sustain those attempting to continue life therein.

The failed garden that becomes the prominent metaphor for the drought of The Dirty Thirties parallels the failure of life itself in Hagar's world. The events surrounding the deaths of those she loves best represent the spilling-over of Hagar's guilt in those lost relationships, and propel the narrative forward through her confession and apology to Murray Ferney Lees, the stranger she mistakes for her dead son. The trip to Shadow Point represents a home-coming for Hagar as she encodes the place viscerally and physically as her prairie home. "The air is uncomfortably warm with that oppressive mugginess we get here in the summer close to the sea," she says. "In Manawaka the summers were all scorchers . . ." (149). Scorchers or uncomfortably warm, the warmth of the seaside garden evokes the prairie garden she left in the move west. She names as hers the house in which she takes shelter, a gray house wanting paint, that is uncannily like the house on the old Shipley place. At the cannery-cum-Shipley house, Hagar is in exile. She is physically removed from both her prairie home and the Vancouver home she shares with Marvin and Doris. In Hagar's mind, the gray, derelict cannery building transforms into her home place, although she has not once

throughout her entire narrative called the Shipley place home. From the outside and within, the derelict house that is evocative of the Shipley place transports Hagar back to her prairie garden home. The kitchen, for example, with its wooden table, "black and sour with spilled grease," that had been "hacked at and initialed by more knives than one (154), parallels the "reeking and stale" (150) kitchen of the Shipley house as she first finds it on her wedding day, and as she finds it again on her return in the 1930s. Hagar's observations that "the kitchen was a shambles," and that "You could have scratched your initials in the dark grease on the oilcloth that covered the table" (170), serve to recast the seaside kitchen as the kitchen of the derelict farmhouse in the prairie garden.

The physical similarities of the cannery and the Shipley place are among other fused notions of time, people, and place that serve as catalysts, enabling Hagar to confess the guilt she has carried with her for her inadvertent hand in John's death, and to come to terms with her pride. Of those fusions of time [past recalled to present], people [Murray Ferney Lees and Hagar's lost son, John], and place, place holds unique importance. With the collapse of the past and present, by mistaking Lees for her beloved son, John, and by her revisiting place—the Shipley place, in the 1930s, Hagar, in her confusion, is able to revisit a time when her son is alive. Her confession ultimately unfolds in the context of the geographical and

emotional prairie place she thought she had long since left behind.

The grey and derelict Shipley place, located in the agricultural garden some distance from the town of Manawaka where Hagar lived as a child, brings disappointment to each member of the Shipley family in turn. The extent of that disappointment for Hagar culminates with her leaving the marriage, but among other disappointments during her time there, is the essential failure of both the garden and the gardener to produce a good living for the family through grain, other crops, or livestock. But failure is relative to expectation. When he defends the decision driven by dream and passion—"Bram was crazy about horses" (83), Hagar recalls—his sentiment reveals not that he is, as Jason has said, "lazy as a pet pig," but that unlike Jason, he measures success according to intrinsic rather than material compensation. "I got enough to buy what I want" (85), he tells Hagar, and he reminds her that "There's more than one way" (85) to be a success.

Bram's sentiment serves to support cultural geographer Ronald Rees' observation that "for a peasant farmer thinking of sustenance rather than profit, wilderness is paradise enough" (50). [With the word paradise, comes an assumption of a version of Eden.] Bram's values are closely aligned with the natural world and with the satisfaction that was Adam's in Eden before the Fall. It is worth noting that Bram's relative satisfaction with his life casts light on the measurement of success as it is tied to the agricultural garden. What Hagar points out here as

failure is actually the opposite: in this instance, the garden is clearly nurturing of the "natural," both in terms of providing the environment for raising horses (the garden) and in providing the emotional environment for the person who would raise them (the gardener).

On the other hand, the more materialistic, cultured, and less "natural" side of Hagar wants more than living in an unpainted house, with linoleum rather than carpets on the floor of the front room. She fails to recognize that she has been given what she asked for—Bram, the natural man as opposed to the more cultured men her father would have chosen for her. When she first meets Bram, he appeals to her because he is earthy, natural, and to her, exotic. "I thought he looked a bearded Indian," she recalls, "so brown and beaked a face. . . The next instant, though, I imagined him rigged out in a suit of grey soft as dove's breast feathers" (45). Bram's sensual appeal to Hagar fires her romantic imagination and obscures her vision of whom and what he is—a poor district farmer with poor prospects. Neither does Hagar accurately assess the fact that he is not only comfortable with his life, he is also happy with it. For him the prairie garden comprises a version of Eden in that it supplies his wants and needs, as it did Adam's. Ironically, in marrying Hagar, he takes on a wife who, like Eve, wants more.

In an extension of her narrative of the failed Shipley place, Hagar reviews another of Bram's schemes. "Honey it was

once" Hagar tells us. "Didn't the white and yellow clover teem all around?" (56).

It did but something else grew as well, some poisonous flower we never saw, hidden perhaps from the daylight, shielded by the foxtails that waved their barbed furry brushes in his [Bram's] pastures, or concealed by the reeds around the yellow-scummed slough, some blossom of burdock or nightshade. (57)

The hint of the prairie as a land of milk and honey is irrefutable, but the contradictions in this brief anecdote of failed bee-keeping inscribe the prairie as both failed and fecund, and the story foregrounds the deceptive appearance of the prairie garden. Consider the implication of Eden-like abundance in the teeming clover, shielded by an equal abundance of "barbed, furry" (57) foxtails, and the contradictory notions of the words barbed and furry—"barbed" as rejecting of approach as "furry" is welcoming. Consider, as well, the anxiety inherent in the notions of the words "poisonous . . . hidden . . . shielded . . . concealed. (57)

But symptomatic of the struggle to live in the prairie garden are disappointments surrounding the Shipley place that are surely not only Hagar's. To a degree, the prairie garden has already failed Bram by the time Hagar marries him. It is in the prairie garden that he suffers the death of his first wife, Clara, as well as the death of his infant first-born son. Moreover, his losses are compounded when Hagar's sons leave the

farm, and he still has no one "to leave the place to" (101). In other words, he has no way to fulfill the dream of founding his own dynasty. And there are other losses as well. Bram endures the loss of a favourite horse, and later the loss of his second wife and younger son, John. Bram further suffers the estrangement of his daughters to the point that he leaves the farm to Hagar when he dies, an alcoholic, in a kind of human ruin that matches the ruin of the prairie garden. Despite considerable personal and economic hardship, however, there remains throughout Hagar's narrative evidence of the dream of hope—Bram's, as well as her own—that kept the Shipley place afloat.

Part of the thread of hope that runs throughout Hagar's narrative resides in the flowers that become the metaphor for the transplanting and naturalizing of humans in the prairie garden. The peonies naturalize, perhaps even too vigourously, too well, given that they have grown too heavy and lack all of the strength required to support their own weight. To some extent, Hagar's description of the transplanted peonies with "pompous blossoms hanging down leadenly, too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves" (4), might be seen as representative of the residents in the fledgling community. The metaphorically self-aggrandizing plants foreshadow the sometimes pompous and self-aggrandizing Jason. Consider the ostentatious display of wealth and mourning-made-public in the Italian marble monument to Hagar's mother, Jason's dead wife. "She was not the only stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery," Hagar recalls, "but

she was the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest" (3). Jason's intractable rejection of his daughter after she marries the socially and culturally inferior Bram provides one example of an individual stumbling with the weight of his own importance.

Jason's "stumbling" in his relationship with his daughter, for instance, is representative of a metaphorical fall from grace in the prairie garden. Jason ostracizes Hagar at the expense of knowing his grandchildren, and ultimately costs himself the satisfaction of the fulfillment of the dream of his own family dynasty—the dream tied to prairie place, in which he invested his life. It is interesting that at Jason's bequest and within a year of his death, as Hagar recalls,

Currie Memorial Park was started beside the Wachakwa River. The scrub oak was uprooted and the couchgrass mown, and nearly circular beds of petunias proclaimed my father's immortality in mauve and pink frilled petals. Even now, I detest petunias. (64)

The park is no less contested space than the cemetery garden in that it represents the prairie cultivated at the expense of the natural order. The new garden—Currie Memorial Park—is Jason's final investment in the future, and a testimonial to his hope for the future.

Ironically, Jason's hope for the future does not extend to Hagar. Jason's bequest demonstrates a degree of his own failure that is tied to his incomplete naturalization in the prairie garden—a failure that is represented, in part, by the petunias in

the park that proclaims his benevolence. With its location near the river, and with scrub oak, couchgrass, and the petunias that Hagar associates with death, the park is a version of the Manawaka cemetery garden to which Hagar returns throughout her narrative. Consider her response to Marvin's and Doris's mention of a nursing home. Marvin's description of the home being in the country, with "Cedars and alders, all around" (75), draws from Hagar an oblique reference to death and another kind of cemetery garden—the memorial park. "Full of petunias, I suppose" (75), she remarks, perhaps experiencing a premonition of her own death.

Laurence, in an interview in *Mosaic*, said of *The Stone Angel* that it was not optimistic. "Optimism in this world," she remarked, "seems entirely impossible to me. But . . . there is hope, and that is a different thing entirely" (83). The flowers to which Hagar alludes in her narrative, and that maintain a sense of garden in the novel, are often flowers that she understands to be representative of hope and proof of indomitable spirit. They are, however, just as much testaments to failure. As we noted at the beginning of this discussion, Hagar favours the largely natural or naturalized prairie flowers that she mentions in a prairie context (for example, lilacs, marigolds, cowslips, and lily of the valley). Lilacs figure in what appears to be Hagar's random introduction to the Shipley place. Associating the colour of the dress with the flowers eases her into a visual and visceral memory of the Shipley place. The lilac on her silk dress, Hagar notes, "is the exact same shade as the lilacs that

used to grow beside the gray front porch of the Shipley place" (29). And she rambles on in a description of prairie place that accommodates and affirms the notion of blighted garden:

There was little enough time or room for flowering shrubs there, with land that was never lucky from the first breaking of the ground, all the broken machinery standing in the yard like the old bones and ribs of great dead sea creatures washed to shore, and the yard muddy and puddled with yellow ammonia pools where the horses emptied themselves. The lilacs grew with no care given them, and in the early summer they hung like bunches of grapes from the branches with leaves like dark green hearts, and the scent of them was so bold and sweet you could smell nothing else, a seasonal mercy. (29)

To Hagar, the overpowering scent of the flowering shrub that grows in this blighted place stands as testimony to its defiant growth in a place where there was "no room" for it and where it was clearly aesthetically out of place. The lilacs become, in this respect, symbols of herself, living where she clearly feels aesthetically out of place. At the same time, the comparison of the lilacs to bunches of grapes, heavily scented, with heart-like leaves, is a description in keeping with narratives of a pleasantly visceral pastoral place, of which the Edenic garden—the Lord's vineyard, sweet-scented and productive—is one.

Hagar's description of the lilacs evokes lines from Walt Whitman's elegy for Abraham Lincoln:

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-
 wash'd palings,
 Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves
 of rich green,
 With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the
 perfume strong I love. . . With delicate-color'd blossomd
 and heart-shaped leaves of rich green . . .

(St. 3, 79)

The lilacs here bear ambiguous associations with life and death; their vibrance lingers and repeats in the reference to strong perfume. The flowers' purple colour bears association with the traditional flower of elegy in Greek mythology, the purple iris, for which the lilac is a replacement appropriate to a more contemporary time and a new world.

In his essay on *The Stone Angel*, "Antimacassared in the Wilderness," Dennis Cooley draws out the significance of Hagar's love of colour, particularly "purples and blues . . . the traditional colours of royalty and the sky—symbols of the social and mental ascendancy she [Hagar] thinks matter and she presumes to possess" (40). The hardy lilac, as opposed to the iris, is a symbol appropriate to prairie place in that the naturalized lilac thrives on prairie soil where many foreign and less-adaptive ornamental plants do not.

As resistant to harsh prairie winters, and as threatening to "civilized" gardens as the tough-rooted cowslips that grow in the Manawaka cemetery, lilacs are at least as threatening to an

orderly garden—in that they too grow wild, a euphemism for naturalization. The flowers symbolize part of Hagar's struggle with being the daughter of a Scottish immigrant in a prairie place as she struggles with the pull of two worlds—the cultivated old world of her ancestral past and the natural new world of prairie place. Life in the prairie garden engenders the struggle to some extent. The immigrant settlers, no less than the botanical species in the Manawaka cemetery, represent a threat to the natural order on the prairie, but at the same time, their naturalization to new place threatens the informing old world order that has accompanied them to the new place. Clearly a garden metaphor, naturalization is a notion that commonly applies to people, plants, and animals being transferred from a foreign environment into a region in which they not only establish themselves, but "flourish." Besides putting down roots metaphorically and literally, naturalization is dependent on adaptation to the new environment, the success of which hinges less on the transplanted parent generation than on its offspring. The true measure of Jason's success, then, resides in his daughter, Hagar.

Hagar's reference to indigenous and imported plants in the prairie garden serves to remind us of prairie history both prior to, and in the aftermath of, European settlement. The mention of the peony provides an oblique reference to ancient history as well. The plant, that in garden lore derives from the Greek *Paiōn*, physician of the Gods (OED), serves to evoke the notion of

cemetery garden as a place of healing. Hagar herself is in need of healing both physically and psychologically, and it is one of the novel's ironies that she seems to most dislike the plant that metaphorically, at least, might be beneficial to her. That the peonies continue to grow in the cemetery garden is an indication of the plant's ability to adapt and successfully take root and naturalize in the prairie garden.

Whereas the peony provides a subtle example of successful naturalization in that it flourishes in the new prairie garden, the lilac becomes a more overt metaphor for newcomers to prairie place. To varying extents, people similarly undergo processes of naturalization, the proof of which resides in their offspring. In light of the implications of the metaphor of adaptation to the garden, consider Jason Currie's, Bram Shipley's, and Hagar (Currie) Shipley's naturalization in the prairie garden. The characters' naturalization is generational as well. Hagar's father, Jason Currie, the eldest of the three, came to the prairies from Scotland; Hagar's husband, Bram, fifteen years Jason's junior, was born and raised in Ontario; and Hagar was born in the prairies. Whereas Jason, for the most part, lives according to the cultural inscriptions derived from his old world upbringing, Bram lives according to the more natural and less-cultured inscriptions derived from his being brought up in the new world. Hagar, in the end at least, lives according to the inscriptions of both Jason and Bram, spending about twenty years with each of them before she moves out on her own. She lives out

the rest of her life between her two sons: first John, who lives with her in her early years on the west coast, and then Marvin, who lives there with her until the end of her life.

Hagar's narratives of both Jason and Bram bear on the fertility and / or failure of the garden. In Hagar's telling, although Jason arrived "without a bean" (7), he was inscribed with the twin narratives of hard work and "stick-to-it-iveness" (13) characteristic of his Scots ancestry. Jason becomes the owner of four farms that he "tenanted" out (41), and rises to become the first merchant in Manawaka. Hagar's narrative of Bram, on the other hand, is one of failure from the start. "Lazy as a pet pig," she reports Jason saying of Bram, "no get-up-and-go" (46). Bram, a homesteader who earns his land by hard work for which he receives no credit from anyone, and particularly not from Jason, is a failure because he does not demonstrate the same incentive to benefit either from the prairie garden by working the land himself, or by profiting from others who work the land for him.

Jason and Bram are cultural opposites in terms of work ethic and financial reward. However, between lost wives, raising motherless children, eventual estrangement from their families, the dream of founding their own dynasties, and a common inability to adapt fully to the prairie garden, they are, as John realizes, "different sides of the same coin" (185). In Jason's case, work ethic, and perhaps education, and a degree of business acumen, provides him with the wherewithal to open Currie's General Store.

The prairie garden from which he derives his family income (he takes rent for the land he owns, and makes money selling food and supplies to district farmers) provides him with the wherewithal to raise his daughter according to the terms of the old world culture—as a lady, inadequately prepared for the life she would lead in the prairie garden. In Bram's case, with his dreamer's approach to life, his obviously less aristocratic background, his lack of education, and his lack of business skill, despite his telling Hagar he has "enough" (85), the prairie garden essentially fails to provide the wherewithal for him to adequately sustain his family. Hagar insinuates these attributes as she draws attention to Bram's crudity time and time again, carping about his bad grammar, his bad manners, and his failed schemes for the farm.

The difference between Jason and Bram, however, is cultural difference that Hagar reads as "lack" rather than difference, *per se*. Hagar's pithy description of a pottery vase, "from some village in England," the very old "brown pottery pitcher edged with anaemic blue" (62) is a comment disparaging Shipley taste as common. The comment demonstrates Hagar's notions of cultural superiority deriving from romantic images of an imaginary world to which she has access only through her father's narratives, but one to which, as a child, she dearly wanted to belong.

How bitterly I regretted that he'd left [Scotland]" she recalls, "and sired us here, the bald-headed prairie stretching out west of us with nothing to speak of except

couchgrass or clans of chittering gophers, or the grey-green poplar bluffs . . . (15).

Hagar's perception that in the "bald-headed" prairie there is "nothing to speak of" (15), bears out Dick Harrison's observation in *Unnamed Country*, that "the prairie was a hard land to capture imaginatively" (131)—harder, perhaps, when imagination is all that can recall a place left behind. Unfortunately for Hagar, Jason's stories comprise a romantic and imaginative model of a full world, a "there" against which she and her father both measure their more present "here." Of the three, only Hagar is sufficiently a part of the prairie garden—that is, sufficiently naturalized—that she is able to both ask, and propose an answer to the question Margaret Atwood foregrounds in *Survival*: "What, why, and where is here?" (17).

The cemetery scenes of Hagar's recall provide cyclical structure to the larger narrative of the book, in marking her physical and imaginative returns to the prairies; moreover, they serve to maintain the inflection of prairie garden in the narrative. To some extent, Hagar's naming of indigenous and imported flowers—peonies, petunias, chrysanthemums, lily of the valley, delphiniums, lilacs, "scarlet-tipped Indian paintbrush" (192)—helps to affirm the sense of prairie place as a garden, at the same time as it aligns the character with nature and the garden. She makes references to the garden largely through the flowers that she frequently names in relation to her clothing, and through the mention of which she segues to the relatively

natural world the flowers represent. And although she is rarely in a garden even in memory, the naming of the flowers demonstrates the importance of the garden inscription, so to speak, that she has carried throughout her life. The significance of the inscription, I would argue, is that even though as many of the flowers Hagar names throughout her narrative signify death, plants such as the peonies and cowslips also signify on-going life and hope for the future.

Part of the thread of hope that runs throughout Hagar's narrative resides in the flowers that become the metaphor for the transplanting and naturalizing of humans in the prairie garden environment. Transplanting and naturalizing means living and dying in the new place. Hagar's narratives are filled with the stories of the deaths of those whom she loves best; however, she looks to flowers and the garden for reasons that are both aesthetic and emotionally gratifying, echoing the literary tradition of envisioning the garden as a place of pleasure.² Despite her constant reference to death, Hagar sees flowers, in part, as agents of mitigation in the generally uncompromising world in which she lives. "I favour flowers," she says, "a leaf, a sprig or two, a measure of gracefulness in an ungainly world" (62). The notions of grace and ungainliness apply equally to the natural and the cultivated, and serve as metaphors for the hope

² Pleasure is only one of several attributes of the traditional literary garden. A characteristic of pleasure, for example, in Milton's garden, is the attribute of evil.

and disappointment that comprise both the "parent" garden of Genesis and its prairie offspring.

Hope and disappointment also come to bear in Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, where, in keeping with the traditional narrative of the settling of America, the prairie figures prominently as the garden of the world. Like Laurence, Stegner builds a cultural ideal predicated on wholly belonging to a place that is in the process of being redefined according to the continuing arrival of newcomers and the expectations they have of the prairie garden—a place as imaginary as it is physical.

Chapter Four

*Home is a Lost Eden: (re)Construction of the Garden in
Wallace Stegner's Wolf Willow*

The expression of place is the evidence of place. The artist is made of the earth in a mystical, Eden-like way: the soil is carried within the body in spite of expulsion from the garden. Human migration results in the accretion of cultural soil.

Mary Murphy

Had Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* been a book of photographs, it might perhaps best have been described as a series of "takes" on its subject. In *Wolf Willow*, Stegner provides select takes of Saskatchewan's Cypress Hills from personal, historical, and fictional perspectives, as he parallels the growth of a child in his formative years with the growth of a town and its surrounds in its formative years—the child and the town being out-growths of lost Eden.

The Edenic overtones in *Wolf Willow* are explicit: Stegner's Saskatchewan place as he imagines it retains particular attributes of Eden, among them the defining ambiguous notions of lack and abundance, innocence and knowledge, familiarity and estrangement. In the beginning, the Garden of Eden and Stegner's prairie version of that garden are defined first by lack, then by abundance. Consider, for instance, the echo of Eden as *tabula rasa* implicit in Stegner's claim that "The world when I began to know it had neither location nor time, geography nor history" (29).

In (re)constructing the West as a garden, Stegner writes his own primordial narrative of the prairie garden, complete in the abundance of freedom from restrictions of both time and place:

When I began to know [the world] . . . it had a wild freedom, a closeness to the earth and weather, a familiarity with both tame and wild animals. It had the physical sweetness of a golden age. It was blessedly free of most restrictions, and its very liberation from the perspective of time and place released our minds for imaginative flights of wonder. (29)

Stegner here stakes out the ground, so to speak, for his Eden-like prairie garden. The "wild freedom" (29) and "closeness to earth and weather" (29) construct the prairie as a "natural" (29). As though to reinforce the notion of freedom and timelessness, the lyric and romantic description serves to evoke the Pastoral of the Golden Age of Rome, Virgil, and the shepherd in the landscape. The first person pronoun "I" suggests a figure of the narrator who is essentially alone in the pastoral place. Stegner echoes, as well, the later golden age of nineteenth century literary tradition as it concerns with Romantic ideals and notions of the sublime, which are, of course, severely tested by the prairie landscape. Inherent in Stegner's description, as well, is the suggestion of order and stability implicit in the very notion of the garden of Genesis that gives form to the earth that has been "without form and void" (Genesis I: ii).

As much as Stegner endows his prairie garden with stability and a sense of primordial space, he underscores that sense of place with lines from Captain William Butler's book, *The Great Lone Land*. On the old maps, Butler observes, "the centre of America was represented as a vast inland sea . . . a prairie ocean . . . with a vast expanse of grass and pale pink roses . . ." (37). Butler muses that this ocean has no past, time has been nought to it, and men have come and gone, leaving behind them no track, no vestige, of their presence. (Butler 36, Stegner, 38)

Implicit in Butler's comment, in the recognition that other people have moved through the space, resides the assumption that there exists evidence of their having done so. Out of the statement that "men have come and gone" (Butler, 38), and have left "behind them no track" (38), arises the question of what constitutes evidence. For Butler, evidence resides in what he sees, and his observation that men have left no sign of their presence, provides a clear indication that he sees nothing. The conception of what might constitute evidence of the land's being used by the "men" (38) to whom Butler refers varies considerably between Aboriginal people and the European newcomers in the prairie place. An Aboriginal person would undoubtedly have seen tracks and traces of the presence of others, but Butler is reading the land as newcomer with experience related to the presence of other people in other places. Born and raised in Ireland, Butler had been stationed with the 69th Regiment of the British Army in India prior to becoming part of the Wolseley

Expedition that brought him to the Northwest in 1870. Butler's deliberate comparisons of the place with the garden in Genesis affirm the connection of one garden with the other. "One saw here the world as it had taken shape and form from the hands of the Creator Nor did the scene look less beautiful because nature alone tilled the earth, and the unaided sun brought forth the flowers" (Stegner, 38). Butler's assumption that human intervention, such as tilling and cultivating the garden, would not necessarily enhance its beauty suggests an affinity with notions of Romantic naturalism to which Stegner himself alludes in the comment that "renewal in Eden" inevitably comes with the conversion of it "into the lamentable modern world" (282).

Stegner's construction of the West as a garden follows the traditional literary imagining of American place. The connection between American place and garden is central to understanding prairie and plains place as garden. In the chapter entitled "The Garden of the World" in *Wolf Willow*, Stegner presents the history of the garden myth in the West in a single sentence when he writes that

[Benjamin] Franklin and [Thomas] Jefferson had formulated it [the myth of the garden], politicians, speculators and railroads had promoted it, and the ignorant faith of hundreds of thousands of home-seekers kept it alive well into the industrial age and out into the dry country (255)

Smith provides an historical overview of the notion of the garden of the world in America. On the one hand, he traces Thomas

Jefferson's agrarian doctrines to Hesiod, Virgil, and their poetic descendents who wrote in praise of husbandry. On the other hand, Smith cites French intellectual radicals such as Abbé Raynal who, during the French Revolution wrote about the farmer not as a pastoral figure, but as a content republican figure comfortable with his modest status in the social strata. The revision of the farmer figure, Smith posits, was instrumental in promoting the notion of America as the "concrete embodiment" (146) of the European dream of Utopia, at the centre of which rests the image of the garden. Smith holds that the act of farming the land transformed the interior to a garden, which in imagination became "the Garden of the World" (139). The notions of the Utopian garden and the agricultural garden, Smith claims, were inclusive of the myths of Eden-like abundance and contentment resting in "the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer . . . (138). Interestingly, Stegner's character "Stegner" in *Wolf Willow*, in part, takes on the role of the heroic figure in the garden. Smith's comments serve to justify Stegner's understanding of place—comprised of both the town of Whitemud and the homestead—that is so clearly informed by such freighted terms as Stegner employs variously throughout the book.

Consider the implicit affirmation of an abundant Eden in the statement that makes Stegner's homesteading family beneficent custodians of the prairie garden:

We endowed our prairie briefly, in 1916, with twenty acres of bluebells That was a green and rainy summer, and the sight of lush grass and wildflowers and the blue

wave of flax persuaded us for a little while that we did indeed live in the Garden of the World. (274)

The description here of abundance and beauty is clearly pastoral, lyric, and Edenic.

There is, in this description of the prairie Eden, a subtle undercurrent of ambiguity. For example, Stegner writes,

Because my parents had brought from North Dakota the notion that flax is the best crop in a newly broken field, we endowed our prairie briefly. . . with twenty acres of bluebells. (274)

The notion of endowment, or gift, houses the idea of improvement. Clearly the twenty acres of the bluebell-like flax flowers contributes to the Stegners' perception of their prairie garden as Eden. However, we are being somewhat misled. Stegner has ambiguously cross-named the plants. The twenty-acre field of blue flowers is clearly flax, and not the natural prairie bluebells at all. More importantly, however, Stegner's description of the flax-cum-bluebells serves to point out how completely ambiguity can be engrained in the garden narrative.

Stegner's claim to endowing the prairie is more tenable, perhaps, if the notion of endowment comes by way of naming the prairie as the "Garden of the World" (274). By extension of his naming the prairie place "Eden," Stegner himself becomes a version of the biblical Adam. *Wolf Willow* is predicated on recovering the loss, finding a past—so, into the place which is (like Eden) imagined to have no past, comes a single character

who names. In Whitemud, it is Stegner who is the Adamic figure as namer, who uses words and becomes story-teller.

Although in the bluebell narrative Stegner credits the homesteaders for having improved Eden, he later casts blame on the homesteaders for their role in the drought that drove them from the prairie landscape. He speaks of the Myth of the Garden in terms evocative of a communicable disease when he describes Pop Martin, who "had the Myth of the Garden bad" (241). "He did not want to be merely a tenant of Eden," Stegner points out, "he wanted to be its founder, creator, landlord, and patron" (241).

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny contributes to the imagining of the West, at least in part, in terms of movement. The movement is tantamount to a never-ending physical and psychological search for Eden. Diane Quantic writes in *The Nature of the Place*, that "the traditional assumption, based on the northern European Puritan interpretation of the Bible that the earth was created for humankind's use (Genesis 1: 26-28), but only if they worked for it, seemed especially appropriate in the New World" (33). Quantic holds that "this exploitive myth merged with the vision of the garden: to prove their worth, men and women must re-establish the garden, and to do that they must prove the worth of the land by tilling it" (33). Moreover, settlers, promoters, and politicians alike saw the westward movement as a physical fulfilment of America's Manifest Destiny. The manifest destiny was first explained in scholarly terms by Frederick Jackson Turner. "Like the myth of the garden," Quantic

notes, "Manifest Destiny was part of the "intellectual baggage" the settlers brought from Europe" (33).

Stegner's life was perhaps influenced by his father's own version of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in that, by the time the child was five, "he had already been moved a half dozen times prior to arriving in Eastend, Saskatchewan. In the autobiographical piece entitled "Letter, Much Too Late," Stegner recalls living in "a dozen towns and cities, three dozen neighbourhoods, half a hundred houses" (Bluebird, 33). In the letter to his mother, Stegner recalls that he and his brother Cece at one point found themselves "living in a Seattle orphans' home" (30) after George Stegner had abandoned his family. These points are worth mentioning because in the six years spent in Eastend—the longest period of time the family stayed anywhere together—the formative years of the child met with the stability of place that comes to inform his later reading and writing of place in *Wolf Willow*.

George Stegner's drive to wander appears to have somewhat abated by the prospect of becoming a homesteader, as he and his family worked the homestead claim for five of the six years required to gain title to it. At the age of five in May, 1914, in a move that reunited the family, Wallace Stegner, along with his mother and older brother, travelled by rail from Iowa and by stagecoach from Moose Jaw to Eastend, Saskatchewan, to join George Stegner on the quarter-section of free land on the Saskatchewan - Montana border.

Two months prior to Wallace Stegner's arrival in Eastend, the Village Council of Eastend, Saskatchewan, *Wolf Willow's* "Whitemud," had held its first council meeting. In the historical narrative of place, over the next six years, wheat yields fell from the record-high forty-five bushels per acre to zero bushels per acre in some areas of the Canadian prairies. For the family, then, the stability of their Eden which derived from putting down roots was undermined by environmental instability—the vagaries of rain and / or the lack of it. Like their biblical ancestors in the original garden, the Stegners' ability to remain in the garden turns on the notion of having knowledge, rather having to acquire it.

In short, I propose that had either Adam and Eve or the Stegners had sufficient knowledge of their respective gardens, ultimately, they would not have had to leave. If the homesteaders had understood, for example, that they were working "submarginal land" (257), that knowledge would surely have had some implication on their expectations of the garden. In a series of conditional clauses, Stegner speculates whether the family might have stayed in the garden if, for example, the town's beginnings had been at the start of a wet-cycle rather than a drought; *if* "Canada had not been given the double duty of providing cannon fodder and growing bread to feed the cannon fodder" (247); *if* the CPR had come through the town; *if* the Stegners had arrived and filed for their homestead earlier—*then*. Then, writes Stegner, they might have gained the title to the land, and stayed.

But there was a drouth [sic], there was a war, the farmers *did* plow up too much submarginal land, the cattlemen *did* get caught without enough hay, Martin *did* have his row with the CPR, there were natural catastrophes. (258)

With the failure of the garden, what amounted to the failure of Eden, like other families numbering in the thousands whose attempts to homestead had also ended in failure, the Stegner family gave up and moved on.

As the notions of timelessness and stability serve to connect Stegner's prairie garden with the Eden of Genesis, the parallel narratives of the Stegners and Adam and Eve leaving the gardens forges another link between the two gardens. Stegner writes a poignant description of the family's last departure from the homestead:

. . . we knew, we all knew we wouldn't be back any more than the families of our acquaintances who had already left; and I imagine we obscurely felt that more than our personal hope had died in the shack that stayed in sight all the time we were bumping down along the field to the border.¹ With nothing in sight to stop anything, along a border so unwatched that it might have been unmapped, something had really stopped there; a crawl of human hope had stopped.

¹ The families and acquaintances to whom Stegner here refers would have been among the "62 percent of homesteaders" in southwestern Saskatchewan whom Barry Potyondi, for one, in his book, *In Palliser's Triangle*, reports abandoned their land between 1910 and the Great Depression" (93).

As we turned at the Line . . . we could still see the round roof of the shack lifting above the prairie north of us. There was nothing else in sight up there but empty prairie. My mother drew in her breath and blew it out again with a little laugh, and said the words that showed us how such a departure should be taken. 'Well,' she said, 'better luck next time!' (282).

Stegner's description evokes another literary leave-taking—Adam and Eve quitting the Garden of Eden in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

They, looking back, all th'eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,

.....

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.

(PL XII, l. 641-47)

Stegner's mother's comment, "better luck next time," (WW 282) is a turn on Milton's phrase, "the world was all before them, where to choose" (PL XII, l. 647). Herein rests one of the differences between the narratives of the Edenic garden on the one hand, and the Eden-like (prairie) garden, on the other: whereas Adam and Eve look back and see "Paradise, so late their happy seat," (PL XII, l. 642.) Stegner looks back and sees "nothing . . . but empty prairie" (282).

Although neither of the two sets of outcasts leave entirely of their own volition, the point is that they both leave, and the failed prairie gardeners, no less than Adam and Eve, will take away with them "imaginatively" part of what they have left

behind. Mary Murphy, in her article, "Intimate Geography," reminds us that the proverbial "soil is carried away within the body in spite of expulsion from the garden" (183).

Stegner throughout the book writes from the perspective of the child through the eyes of the backward-gazing adult. By means of literary reconstruction, Stegner retrieves and recovers his lost past of physical and psychological space and thereby metaphorically returns to the Eden of his childhood. Stegner's child may see "only what he can see" (12), from the vantage point of childhood, but, as Stegner claims, only later does the child "learn to link what he sees with what he already knows, or has imagined, or heard or read, and so come to make perception serve inference" (12). Every child being inevitably lost in the passage to adulthood, the child which Stegner constructs in the narrative, necessarily, can only be drawn retrospectively. The placement of the child in the garden, however, is tantamount to the placement of Adam in Eden, and the "innocent" in the garden becomes yet another point of connection between the Garden of Eden and the prairie version of it, however fertile or failed it might be. The biblical garden is no-less the garden for Adam and Eve leaving it than is the prairie garden any less the garden for the Stegners leaving it. If anything the placement of the child in the prairie garden enhances the notion of Eden regained.

As a child Stegner lived in a border zone created as much by movement back and forth between Canadian and American place as by "the Line" (i.e. the 49th parallel) that bound the Stegner homestead to Canada. But he lived in other border zones as well:

he derived the American experience as the result of living on the homestead during the summer months, and the Canadian experience from living in town during the winter. Each place, occupied tentatively for months at a time, denied him the identity derived of living in the other. During Stegner's childhood, each place—town and homestead—was part of a larger developing place, that, given their locations on the prairies and the relatively brief periods of their existence therein, had few distinct markings of being either one or the other: town and homestead both were works in progress on the prairies.

In *Wolf Willow*, Stegner constructs himself as a child in the prairie landscape that he casts as garden. In "Images of Prairie Man," Eli Mandel addresses the child in prairie literature. Mandel claims that the child "who observes or is seen in the landscape" is no less than "one of the features that appears in conjunction with prairie writing" (49). Mandel brings us to the garden when he proposes that one of the reasons for the presence of the child-figure in prairie writing is that, seen "from the adult's point of view, the child's vision is a vision of innocence, of a lost Eden" (50). "Another way of putting this," Mandel continues, is that the child's vision—again from the adult's point of view is of home" (50). Mandel also brings into attention the implicit search for both lost innocence and home that are central to the myth of the garden, but are not necessarily explicitly drawn out in the doctrines of, say, Manifest destiny, or notions of the garden of the world, the New

Jerusalem, or even the meta-narrative of Eden itself—in which the Fall is of greater and larger dimension than what comes after it.

From a theological point of view, the Fall leads us into life as we know it—imperfect and filled with problems. On the other hand, the Fall provides access to opportunity to search for a place comparable to the one left behind, a search that must inevitably begin in the mind, as do such concepts as loss, innocence, and home—all of which figure largely as notions of the human imagination. Henry Kreisel was one of the first writers to articulate the fact that the prairies are primarily a state of mind, a view that Eli Mandel, for one, speaking of prairie “culture,” takes up in his discussions of prairie writing.

In *Wolf Willow* the perception that the prairies are a state of mind derives support in Stegner’s proposal that the prairies comprise a garden that is Eden-like in its that it shares with the original garden the salient features of ambiguity, timelessness, abundance and innocence. If the notion of the prairie garden warrants further validation, however, it rests in the notion of sanctuary. The reconstruction of Eden in *Wolf Willow* is primarily a search for home and sanctuary— notions that are commonly understood to offer physical and emotional shelter, security, and refuge.

For Stegner, the search for a creation story appropriate to the the region of Saskatchewan’s Cypress Hills, the town of Whitemud, the river valley, and the Hills themselves begins with the notions of birthing. “When I feel the need to return to the womb,” Stegner writes, Whitemud “is the place to which my well-

conditioned unconscious turns. . . " (22). Stegner here foregrounds "Freudian implications" (22) of his recurring dream of place that is effectively shrouded in what Stegner himself identifies as "nostalgic melancholy" (22)—hence, the (re)creation of the child and the child-grown-up in the garden.

If Stegner's recovered child is in the prairie Eden by dint of being an innocent in the reconstructed (prairie) Garden of Eden, so is Stegner's adult, by dint of being the grown-up version of the child. In *Wolf Willow*, two voices speak contrapuntally: the child, in his reconstructed present, and the adult in his present. The scent of the wolf willow effectively creates the "double" present as it jettisons the figure from the contemporary, to the imagined and retrieved "present" of the past, with Stegner's visceral response to "the tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell" of the "shrub now blooming with small yellow flowers" (18). Stegner writes:

It is the wolf willow, and not the town or anyone in it that brings me home. For a few minutes, with a handful of leaves to my nose, I look across at the clay bank and the hills beyond where the river loops back on itself . . . and all the years between are shed like a boy's clothes dumped on the bath-house bench. The perspective is what it used to be, the dimensions are *restored*, the senses are as clear as if they had not been battered with sensation for forty alien years. And the queer adult compulsion to return to one's beginnings is assuaged. A contact has been made exactly equivalent with memory, and a hunger is satisfied.

The sensuous little savage that I once was is still intact
in me. (19)

The impact of the wolf willow, a plant that grows in abundance in the prairie garden, affects the narrator's leap back in time. In his looking "beyond" (19) the Hills "where the river loops back on itself" (19) in a form of doubling, Stegner creates a mirror image of "back" (19) and "beyond" (19) that, in turn, reflects his own sense of being doubled as a child in the past he recreates. The reference to the recovery of self, the return "to one's beginnings" (19) to a place where "hunger is satisfied," evokes a return to Eden where want is sated: home—with its implication of healing refuge, restoration, beginnings. And inherent in both the notion of the shedding of years and clothing, that leads back to the garden before the Fall by means of the suggestion of nakedness of body and spirit, and the notion of the senses being cleared, resides a suggestion of baptism and cleansing—in the prairie garden. Indeed, speaker contends, "I have, so to speak, recovered my self exactly as I used to be" (19); moreover, he claims, "the perspective is what it used to be" (19). His view that the contact with the past "has been made exactly equivalent with memory," and his view that he has recovered his self "exactly" as he "used to be" (19), at once elide the past and comprise the contrapuntal relationship between the present of the child and that of the adult.

According to the narrative Adam and Eve were alone in the Garden of Eden. Alone means "without the presence of others" (OED). In literature, aloneness is the legacy of lyric writing,

and Stegner's *Wolf Willow* is to a considerable extent, a lyric text. By this I mean a text in which a reflective speaker speaks intimately, primarily to himself—in retrospect, in reverie, mulling-over, musing. The figure in *Wolf Willow* is like other solitary literary figures to the extent that the pastoral acts of those figures might be similar. The figure in *Wolf Willow* watches "the herd" (19), communes with nature, and implies his one-ness with nature through a bird: the prairie meadowlark. The reference to the meadowlark and likewise the gopher heralds a different and contemporary pastoral as it steps away from tradition to locate the pastoral place in the prairie garden. Of this place the speaker is able to say that "the queer adult compulsion to return to one's beginnings is assuaged," and that "I have, so to speak, recovered myself as I used to be . . ." (19). With the recovery of the child, interestingly, comes the recovery of the ego of the child-state and Stegner's feeling that he is the point in the centre of the universe. One of the assumptions is that, in comparison with adults, children have greater awareness of the local, and proportionately less awareness of the external world. This is clearly the case for Stegner's imagined child-figure when Stegner writes that the "child sees only what he can see" (12).

Ann Mandel notes that Stegner "becomes the central singer in this new world, like the meadowlark that shares the moment with him"² (95). Mandel writes:

² "The Frontiers of Memory! Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, a Neglected History.

This moment is primitive and sensual, it is literary and affiliates the book with an existing literary form, and it is quintessentially North American, new world. Stegner is looking not just for history, but a geographical history, and that meadowlark is certainly a literary relative of Whitman's mockingbird and thrush (95).

Mandel here affirms the connection between Stegner and his own American literary past. But Stegner undeniably casts himself, as well, in the light of the pastoral shepherds of Virgil's *Eclogues* when he writes in *Wolf Willow* of "lying on a hillside" where he sprawls "among the crocuses, watching the town herd, and snaring May's emerging gophers" (19). Having said "I feel how the world still reduces me to a point and then measures itself from me" (19), Stegner clearly figures himself as the point in the centre of the circle of an idyllic world that he connects to myth by means of the purple prairie crocus.

The purple colour of the flower evokes Whitman's lilacs and the flowers of the underworld of Greek mythology. The flower with its implications comes up again in the novella, "Carrion Spring," wherein the turning point of the story comes with Molly looking down to see near her toe "a half-crushed crocus, palely lavender, a thing so tender and unbelievable in the waste of brown grass under that great pour of sky," that she cries out, "'Why, good land, look at that!'" (237). On the one hand, the crocus clearly represents Molly, herself half-crushed by the struggle to live in a prairie West that is here figured in part as both waste land and underworld. On the other hand, however, the flower represents

not just land, but *good* land that, in Molly's eyes, embodies the dream of a good life in a place that exists perhaps as a version of an Eden complete even to the point of elevation. The narrator writes:

It [the crocus] lay in her palm, a thing as lucky as a four-leaf clover, and as if it had some effect in clearing her sight, Molly looked down the south-facing slope and saw it tinged with faintest green. (237)

The description of elevation here is reminiscent of the literary convention of the sublime characteristic of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century topographical long poems such as Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" and Pope's "Windsor Forest," as well as J. McKay's early Canadian long poem "Quebec Hill."

The meadowlark, gopher, and crocus, I propose, should prompt the reader to take a closer look throughout *Wolf Willow* at the figure among the flora and fauna of the prairie in the new world garden, as he anthropomorphizes and projects feelings of mutual camaraderie. The meadowlark here serves as a case in point. Perhaps the meadowlark singing from a fencepost—a meadowlark whose dialect I recognize—feels the same way.

All points on the circumference are equidistant from him; in him all radii begin; all diameters run through him; if he moves, a new geometry creates itself around him (19).

As that meadowlark comes to represent all meadowlarks, so does the solitary figure in the new world represent all like wanderers in new versions of the old garden.

We have in *Wolf Willow*, in part, a narrative of a solitary figure finding home in the "new" garden, a version of which rests in the village of Whitemud, the place that has "scored" into Stegner the notions of sanctuary and home that are so central to his narrative. Consider as well Stegner's image of the Cypress Hills region as sanctuary alongside another of his "takes" on the area that he presents not only as a "gun-toting frontier" (14), but in which he presents himself figured as a hero, albeit conflated and comic. Comic is not a word that comes readily to mind in a search for a description of *Wolf Willow*, but be that as it may, the book is not without moments of gentle and understated humour that simultaneously play off against the central constructed self of the narrative. The introduction of the West into which Stegner first writes himself as a child presents in one of those narratives—at once gently self-mocking and filled with a kind of wonder at the child's perception of the world.

Other literary beginnings to the notion of the myth of the garden in America reside, for example, in the pastoral poetry of Virgil, Milton, and Whitman, among others. But among the multiple beginnings, as well, is the extension of the inscription of place as garden into the western plains. Of interest to the present discussion is the solitary, and to some extent child-like, innocent in the figure of the cowboy in the garden space. In contrast to literary history of the American West, in Canada there has been no literary tradition of a 'cowboy frontier' so to speak, a narrative that Stegner playfully takes up in *Wolf Willow*

³ The families and acquaintances to whom Stegner here refers would have been among the "62 percent of homesteaders" in southwestern Saskatchewan whom Barry Potyondi for one, in his book, *In Palliser's Triangle*, reports abandoned their land between 1910 and the Great Depression" (93).

when he brings the notion of the cowpuncher across the line.

Stegner writes:

I have been tempted to believe," he writes, that I grew up on a gun-toting frontier. This temptation I trace to a stagecoach ride in the spring of 1914, and to a cowpuncher named Buck Murphy (14).

The "cowpuncher" anecdote that bears on Stegner's novellas in *Wolf Willow* places the figure of the innocent once again in the garden. In this anecdote, although Stegner does not assume the child's point of view, he is nonetheless informed by a child with a heroic imagination:

No trains were yet running when the stage brought in my mother, my brother, and myself, plus a red-faced cowpuncher with a painful deference to ladies and a great affection for little children. I rode the sixty miles on Buck Murphy's lap, half anesthetized by his whiskey breath, and during the ride I confounded both my mother and Murphy by fishing from under his coat a six-shooter half as big as I was. (14)

His heroic imagination notwithstanding, the child is the hero of the narrative, as well, in confounding both the mother and the cowpuncher by seizing the six-shooter. The anecdote is evocative of a humorous short story that might have been written by O. Henry or Stephen Crane, for example, in which the child-figure takes the role of the hero.

In the cowpuncher anecdote, Stegner drops himself into the coded narrative of the cowboy West, the public perception of

which, in *Wolf Willow*, he makes it his mission to challenge. The year is 1914. If the world is at war, Stegner, the child, makes no mention of it: if mechanization and industrialization are threats to the world, Stegner, the child, is unaware of that also. Stegner arrives by stagecoach—a dramatic arrival to early twenty-first century eyes and imagination, given the largely technicolored image of the romantic westerns of the mid-twentieth-century when Hollywood made hay out of them, so to speak. There were trains, but when Stegner arrived, the trains had not yet reached the region of the Cypress Hills, though George Stegner had been working with a railroad crew in preparing for the laying of the railroad track that would complete the line from Moose Jaw to East End, Saskatchewan. The point is that the arrival of a "gun-toting" cowpuncher by stagecoach is part of the coded narrative of the frontier West.

Stegner's cowpuncher carries the codes of the West that Dick Harrison convincingly teased out of frontier fiction for a talk at the University of Manitoba (July, 2004). Harrison's comments comprise an extension of the discussion in *Unnamed Country* in which he draws on Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Harrison's interest rests in the "Edenic overtones" comprising Wister's description of a world crossed over by Adam, and Noah en route from Genesis (76), and Harrison draws on *The Virginian* as "an archetype of frontier fiction" (75). Harrison's observation about Wister's "Western actions being paradigms for the development of the character of America as a whole" (76) might as easily have been made of Stegner. I propose that Stegner, in *Wolf*

Willow, constructs himself in part as a western character, and inscribes that character with the particular part of the code with which he (Stegner, the writer) has himself been inscribed. For instance, Stegner's comment that Whitemud was a hard town on women (243) comprises deference-painful or otherwise-reminiscent of the character, Buck Murphy.

In constructing himself according to the codes of the West with which he is inscribed, Stegner figures himself as a kind of new Adam. He is, I propose, a (revised) western hero of a revised heroic narrative that takes place in the prairie garden. The theory derives from the image of little gun-fighter, the revised hero, who, as a child, is also *somewhat* representative of the innocent in the garden, Gentle and comic the cowpuncher anecdote may be, but wholly innocent it is not. The child's taking the gun apparently without Murphy's notice, hints at an inter-generational transfer of both codes and power that reverberates beyond the action and the later recall of it in the continuing metaphoric retrospective, finding, and re-creating the region and the lost childhood. To some extent the child's innocence is in question even as he enters the garden in the new world, which, in the aftermath of the Fall, must necessarily only be re-entered. There is none but Adam who can be "first" in the garden; therefore, the perception of having been first, even in a new garden, hinges on a matching perception of new place.

Stegner, in recalling various acts of childhood, makes the case for the lost innocence of the child in the garden perhaps most convincingly in the final chapter of the book, "False Front

Athens," in the narrative of Mah Li, a Chinese cook who had arrived in the area of Whitemud at the turn of the century. Stegner muses, "I don't suppose a single day of [Mah Li's] life went by that he was not victimized somehow" (128). Stegner himself was one of the boys who stole candy from Mah Li's cafe, "potted two of his ducks (128); over-turned his outhouse and generally "made his life miserable" (128). Stegner was here participating in a code of belonging to a group of xenophobes in the community who would perhaps expel particular kinds of people from their Eden. Certainly, the code sanctions the making of victims of "others" in the garden—from Aboriginals to progressively newer arrivals to the region—who stand out for reason of accent, language, race, creed, religion, place of origin, moral persuasion, physical or mental ability, and even personal habit.

Stegner's novella, "Carrion Spring," focuses on ranchlife-cum-homesteading. In this story, the woman central to the narrative represents the state of flux in the region of the Cypress Hills once again being refigured. In this new "take" on the region, to some extent, Stegner is refiguring the land from his own construct of a fictionalised-historical place, to an historical-fictionalised place. The novella, as well as the companion novella, "Genesis," provides for Stegner the opportunity to patch together what he knows through experience of place with history and folklore, and therein rests their success. The novellas exist, in part, as "takes" on life in the prairie garden as the protagonists struggle within their physical and

psychological environments, each conditioned and determined in no small part by the other.

Stegner precedes the novellas with a prefatory chapter, "Specifications for a Hero," that at the least, hints at the necessary revision of old ideals in a new place, for which the notion of garden is an apt metaphor. In the chapter, he draws attention to the individuals that come to be part of emerging communities such as Whitemud—characters that come to be figured as folk heroes known by their nicknames. They are outstanding, in part, because the nicknames attest to their individuality or refer to distinct attributes, some of which, Stegner writes, "went along with a set of standard frontier attitudes" (127). On the other hand, they are outstanding, because of the distinctive attributes from which the names derive. The prominent concern here is naming, the first of the Adamic acts in the Garden of Eden. In the prairie garden, distinctive proper nouns serve in part to make up for the absence of other and older proper nouns such as would be part of the inscriptions of an older and more established place. One of the attributes of Eden is that it has no past. To some extent, proper names fill in some of the gaps by identifiably figuring the new place and thereby assigning to it points of reference.

Unlike the places of relative cultural homogeneity and little diversity that newcomers might have left behind, Whitemud was comprised of cultural diversity. Difference forges new communities, knitting them together by means of cultural difference rather than cultural likeness. As historian Gerald

Friesen notes in *The West*, "The Prairies could be described as uniform in their diversity" (5). Out of emerging communities develops a folk-culture into which subsequent entrance—blooming so to speak, in the new garden—is predicated on newly-forged, but not necessarily new values. The narrator lists the cultural attributes valued in Whitemud: particular accents, from Montana, Texas, Canada; "people who wore overalls or worked with their hands" (129); or "those with special skills, so long as those skills were not too civilized" (129). In short, valued individuals were those who were sufficiently economically and intellectually resourceful to "stick it out," and transform the garden in the new place according to the values of the old.

The transformation of the new, according to the terms of the old, amounts to a despoiling of the new. The change amounts to a loss of innocence in the garden often demonstrated by the destruction of the life of the 'new'—the unknown and strange—in the hope of establishing in its place the known and familiar. Consider that Stegner in *Wolf Willow*, and before him, explorers and surveyors from Henry Kelsey forward, describe the prairies in terms of the garden narrative and its notions of abundance. Consider Stegner's lyrical descriptions of

the coulees of the Hills themselves . . . opulent with elk and bear . . . antelope [moving] across the aprons of the hills like cloud shadows. (66)

In this list, Stegner replicates the Adamic act of naming in the Garden of Eden. In addition to "beaver, mink, otter, ermine, and muskrat" (66), Stegner writes,

This earth was densely peopled with . . . prairie dogs, picket-pin gophers, filed mice, weasels, ferrets, badgers, coyotes, jackrabbits, burrowing owls We printed on an earth that seemed creation-new (272)

Here Stegner once again asserts his view that prairie West is an Eden, but it is an Eden into which, like the other incomers to the garden of the world, he enters more as marauder and plunderer than keeper. The narrative of abundance and lack becomes inter-woven with another narrative of ambiguity—the narrative of life and death.

Part of *Wolf Willow* is about writing the past that was unknown to Stegner as a child. The acts of naming take us onto the ground of place and identity that Robert Kroetsch gestures toward when he says "in a sense we haven't got an identity until we have a story. The fiction makes us real" (30). For his part, Stegner tells Paula Simon much the same thing when he says, "I really believe that places aren't places until they have stories" (29)—and therein rests Stegner's contribution to prairie writing.

Stegner writes, in part, out of the ethos of his time—the 1950s—when public awareness of the Great Depression and the wars of the first half of the twentieth century were such that memory of the relatively recent past exacerbated anxiety for the future. With the events of the Great War and World II came new awareness of the fragility of the world. In seeking to understand what happened in the Garden of the World, Stegner stands at the nexus of the "modern" environmentalist movement that took on new life in the 1960s. What better place than a garden, the most recently

imagined garden in world history, to try to recoup the devastating loss of innocence being felt the world over?

The garden in Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring*, like the other gardens evocative of the Edenic garden considered in this dissertation, is there for aesthetic and spiritual purposes. The garden's promise of recovery and restoration symbolizes the hope for the healing of people and place in the aftermath of six years of unquestionable blight in light of the economic depression and environmental disaster. Alongside the blight, however, Kroetsch's lush, dream-like garden constructs the prairie in terms of fertility and even abundance to reinvent and relocate Eden in the prairies. Kroetsch's literary prairie garden reveals a complexity of place that has hitherto gone relatively un-noticed in the myriad ways in which it has been understood. In Kroetsch's long poem, *Seed Catalogue*, the narrator points to that complexity in reference to his father who clearly understands the garden as the home place:

My father . . . was puzzled
by any garden that was smaller than a
quarter-section of wheat and summer-fallow (15).

Chapter Five

The Old Confusions: Unnamed Contraries &
Edenic Ambiguity in *The Words of My Roaring*

*We confuse beginnings and endings. They are alike
so often.*

Johnnie Backstrom

At the centre of Robert Kroetsch's novel *The Words of My Roaring* resides the gloriously ambiguous notion of prairie as a version of the Garden of Eden—blessed and blighted. Eden-like and pastoral in dimension and character, Kroetsch's prairie garden derives, in part, from cultural understandings of the past rooted in old world historical and literary traditions, and, in part, from cultural understandings of the contemporary present beginning to take root in a "new" world, with the need for historical and literary traditions of its own.

The notion of the garden—especially the walled garden—is a matter of literary convention. It derives from literary history, as do the attributes of the garden, such as the conceits of the pastoral, among them, for example: the natural vs. the artificial world; the presence of flowers, especially roses; water; fruit and shade trees, birds and birdsong; wildlife; snakes; demi-gods, and / or often innocent and unwary, if not hapless, human beings. Characteristic of the garden as well, are related attributes of nature such as the colour and fragrance of blossoming flowers; the sweetness of the fruit growing therein; trilling birds; moving water; cool shade; and gentle breezes. The garden evokes

kinesthetic, visceral, and emotional response and holds the promise of cleansing, healing, restoration, renewal, protection, respite, and sanctuary.¹

The Eden-like garden of the prairies yields its promise of healing and restoration to the point that Kroetsch's narrator and protagonist, Johnnie Backstrom, reports recapturing "all that was gone and past" (159). Johnnie's confession that each night he "was a virgin again" (156), a reference to the experience he has had in the Eden-like garden on the prairies, suggests the recovery of Eden-like (lost) innocence. Part of Johnnie's narrative is otherwise informed by biblical narratives as well. His comment, "For six days I was a busy and labouring man," (136), echoes the biblical edict of the Ninth Commandment: "Six days shalt thou labour . . ." (Exodus 20:9).² The dictum relates to the exile of Adam and Eve into the blighted wilderness wherein humankind will forever labour to live by their own means (Genesis 3:19). The period of six days it takes before Johnnie emerges from the Eden-like garden—a *tabula rasa*, cleansed, renewed, re-born, re-created in a manner of speaking—from the Eden-like prairie garden—parallels the length of time it takes for the creation of the biblical garden in the book of Genesis. When Johnnie emerges into the world on the day he is to give his only "formal" political speech of his election campaign, it is after he has spent six days in the proverbial wilderness and six nights

¹ See Curtius, 183 ff.

² See also: Exodus 16:26; 31:15; 34:21; 35:2; Leviticus 23:2; Ezekiel 46:1; Luke 46:1

in an Eden-like walled garden belonging to his mentor, surrogate father, and political opponent, Doc Murdoch.

A walled garden on the order of the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*³ serves as a setting for an allegory of romantic love in *The Words of My Roaring*. At the centre of the first half of the *Roman* is the (irreligious) garden—the symbol of courtly life and courtly love therein. As C. S. Lewis observes, the impudently parodic garden of romantic love and delight in the *Roman*, is the "imitation of a different garden—" the Garden of Eden (154). So it is that *The Words of My Roaring*, at the centre of which resides a garden of romantic love and delight, is also an imitation of not just one different garden, but several. For example, when Johnnie likens the Doc's garden to Eden (58), and later speculates that "the Hanging Gardens of Babylon must have looked a lot like Murdoch's backyard" (156), his comments reflect the ancestry of the prairie garden in traditional horticultural and literary gardens alike.

In the allegorical garden of the *Roman*, as John Fleming observes, the dreamer finds "Love, surrounded by Mirth, Youth, and Largesse," as well as "Danger, Shame . . . and kindred powers" (124). The dreamer in Kroetsch's allegorical prairie garden(s) also finds love therein, and with

³ The *Roman*, with its allegory of love in a garden is a base-text for love poetry that follows it. According to C.S. Lewis, it is "the typical poem of the Middle Ages . . . in its richness and variety, and typical also in its radical vices" (154). "As a germinal book" of the Middle Ages, Lewis continues, the *Roman* "ranks second to none except the Bible and the Consolation of Philosophy" (157).

it, versions of the personified abstracts of love. For example, with the healing and life-affirming Helen Persephone—whose name, with its associations with spring and fertility hints at the mythological gardens of the underworld—Johnnie Backstrom, the lover and dreamer in the prairie garden, finds love, joy, youth, and largesse. As Lewis reminds his readers, "A man need not go to the Middle Ages to discover that his mistress is many women as well as one" (118). Johnnie's happiness in the garden is such that he wants to "reach up and stop the old world from spinning" (156-7)." In short, he wants to suspend time—a notion that further ties the prairie garden to the different garden.⁴

In the Roman, among the personified presences in the garden who are part of the diction of love, are Hope, Love, Youth, Joy, Largesse, Danger, and Shame" (124). Danger, (also "Daunger") Lewis proposes, is "a *vilains*" (sic) as described in the Roman. *The vilains* of medieval literature is a "swarthy, huge and hirsuit," (124; Roman 292-4) peasant, with "eyes that burn like fire" (124), and who "bawls at the top of his voice" (124). A *vilains* is a somewhat crude and uncouth oaf, is more rascal or rogue than evil. Johnnie is something of a *vilains*. He may not be swarthy, but he repeatedly describes his own "quite . . . huge

⁴In Eden, time is limitless. It should perhaps go without saying that if time were to stop, the Doc's garden would be a replication of Eden, rather than a version of it, and as such, would be subject to the conditions, constraints, and limitations of the biblical garden without variation on which the narrative of *The Words of My Roaring* depends. Part of the point of the parodic primordial literary narrative is to construct an imitative version of "original" place suitable to the "new" or other place of its concern.

head" (39), "huge feet" (41), and "huge hands" (133). He makes repeated reference to his head of "blondish" (162) "fair hair" (4), and he is clearly somewhat hirsute. "The hair on my head is straightish, but thank God, I am elsewhere a mass of curls" (169), he says, and "I have this hair on my chest which is naturally curly," (169). Moreover, as much as Johnnie may "stride, and thunder, and roar" (162), as Helen tells him he does, neither is he of evil intent. Johnnie's wife, Elaine, for her part, evokes the personified abstract, *Papelardie*, one of the "Kindred powers" (124) that Lewis explains as "that quality which parents call Chastity, and courtly lovers Prudery" (127).

Although there are many comparisons to be made between the medieval garden of the *Roman* and the modern garden of *The Words of My Roaring*, one more brief point will serve to strengthen my observations regarding similarities between medieval personifications and modern characters. Also characteristic of medieval love poetry, Lewis notes, is the presence in the garden of the god of Love and his mother Venus. According to Lewis, "The consistent tendency of medieval love poetry was to substitute for Venus and her son a King and Queen of Love who are, of course, a pair of lovers" (120). In *The Words of My Roaring*, Johnnie and Helen, the lovers in the prairie garden, might at least, in part, serve as contemporary equivalents to the substitutes for the King and Queen of love in the medieval garden. As Johnnie and Helen represent the King and Queen, the King and Queen themselves find representation of the Doc, and the love of his life, Johnnie's mother. In short, as there are two pairs of lovers in the garden

of the Roman, there are two pairs of lovers in the prairie garden, as well.

Johnnie's report of the conversation he has with the Doc on the night of Jonah's drowning reveals the relationship between the Doc and Johnnie's mother:

"She's [Helen] a good girl. She brings life back into the old house. It reminds me—" He looked out at the lake; the sun was low enough so the glare didn't hurt our eyes. "It brings to mind the way it used to be when your mother was alive. She'd drop by laughing and talking, and that whole house would be alive. She loved flowers."

I wanted to talk about Helen. I wanted to explain to him how a man can have a sudden wave of desire that makes him irresponsible. But the Doc couldn't say enough about my mother. I didn't get a chance to open my mouth." (71)

The expression of the Doc's thought broken by the pain of profound loss—his non-verbal gesture of looking out across the water, a gesture of emotion—is a gesture of time in which he recovers himself and regroups, so to speak. The Doc's love for Johnnie's mother, whose absence he clearly continues to grieve, is met in Johnnie's love for Helen. The Doc's remarks also suggest that he might at least sense the attraction between Johnnie and Helen. In addition to drawing implicit but unmistakable parallels between himself and Johnnie, and between Helen and Johnnie's mother, the Doc's comments bring the four lovers into alignment. To some extent, the alignment of the lovers and the love narratives, the suggested presence of

flowers, and the inclusion of water in the setting, echoes, "the widespread classical topos of "idealized nature" (56) that John Fleming, for one, finds in the *Roman*.

Kroetsch's drought-stricken prairies of the nineteenth-thirties also reflect the topos of idealized nature. Kroetsch works the terrain doubly. Doc Murdoch's Eden-like Paradise grows in the heart of the larger blighted prairie garden of the Canadian prairies.⁵ The notion of garden in *The Words of My Roaring* is a manifestation of the dream that the Paradise proffers. The Doc's healing garden, a *locus amoenus* or "pleasance" within the whole of the drought-stricken Canadian prairies, is by no means a new notion in literature. As Curtius explains, the pleasance, or *locus amoenus*, is "a clearly defined topos of landscape description" (198) which "forms the principle motif of all nature description" from the Empire through the sixteenth-century (195). The site of beauty, shade, and nature, the pleasance—that at the minimum, comprises a tree or trees, water, and often birdsong and flower—forms part of the scenery of pastoral, and erotic poetry. Johnnie's healing in the contemporary *locus amoenus*, the Doc's pastoral, erotic, and romantic dream garden, also portends a kind of healing in the larger prairie garden. At end of the narrative, with a restored faith in himself derived from demonstrations of his wife's, his (goddess) lover's, and his constituents' faith in him, Johnnie

⁵ In the present discussion I draw Curtius's translation of Virgil's premise that "since Paradise is a garden, a garden can, by transposition, be called Paradise (*Poetae*, V 275 . . .)" (200).

appears to be headed toward responding to the "need to make amends in this world" (211). Like Johnnie's promise of rain, and no less the fulfillment of that promise, the dream keeps hope alive.

Since the early English language writing of prairie place, writers and artists have thought of the Canadian Northwest as a garden. Their imaginings of it, as such, were met in the work of artists such as George Grant, for one, whose illustrations in *Picturesque Canada* reveal experience of garden in the old world and the desire for Eden in the new. Kroetsch, in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, reiterates Dick Harrison's observation in *Unnamed Country* that "the artists saw not what they were seeing but what they'd seen, or, better still, what they would like to have seen: Eden" (Kroetsch, 15). The point of using Kroetsch's reference to what Harrison has to say here, is that the reference is an articulation of a principle which informs Kroetsch's theoretical and creative writing.⁶ Ronald Rees, in his book, *Land of Earth and Sky*, comments in a similar vein when he writes that "paintings that suggested correspondence between the old and new comforted the homesick by preserving the patterns and traditions of the old world they reassured the settlers of the continuity of cultural ties (37)."⁷ As artistic and literary quotations demonstrate, and as Kroetsch shows in *The Words of My Roaring*, the image of the garden as paradise has the potential to provide

⁶ See Harrison, *Unnamed Country*, 31.

⁷ See also Ronald Rees, *New and Naked Land*.

(at least) temporary emotional respite from exile in assisting the dream out of it—emotionally if not physically—into the past or into the future.

Critics of *The Words of My Roaring*, such as Peter Thomas, observe that the central character in the novel, Johnnie Backstrom, speaks from the context of "Eden or apocalypse, ends and beginnings" (38). I argue that for Johnnie, who is as acutely aware of living as of dying, the context is *both* Eden and Apocalypse. In the fluctuations between Eden and Apocalypse, and between beginnings and endings, resides ambiguity. As Johnnie says, "We confuse beginnings and endings. They are alike so often" (7). Consider, in Revelation, the reiteration of the notions of beginning and ending (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). Consider, in Genesis, the opening words: "In the beginning" (Gen. 1:1). The narrative of the Garden of Eden and the prophecies of Revelation foreground beginning and ending respectively. Inherent in those notions of beginning and ending, however, are myriad other beginnings and endings which are only slightly less propitious or cataclysmic in dimension than those that alternately "book-end" the biblical text and reside in the garden of creation.

The Book of Genesis foregrounds "beginning." In the context of the narrative of the Garden of Eden, we are aware of beginnings and endings and we are aware of the namings that connect to them—namings that appear to divide and order time and space in the newly created world. However, the terms, which propose binary opposition, however, cannot be held apart.

Consider in the apparently diametric opposition between day and night the notions that appear to be distinct and apart from each other. In the hours of dusk and dawn, night and day to some extent are not distinct from each other at all. They are, at best, false opposites. Day and night take on the qualities of each other to the point that two apparently diametric opposites dissolve into the ambiguous state occasioned by the transition of one into the other. As it is with day and night, and Eden and Apocalypse, so it is with life and death, and so it is with the garden.

As a veritable personification of ambiguity, Johnnie speaks from the context of Eden and Apocalypse, from one of two blessed and blighted versions of the Edenic garden in the Canadian prairies in *The Dirty Thirties*. Among the various attributes of Eden common to both the vast and blighted garden—that is, the prairies on the one hand, and on the other hand, the small, contained, blessed, Paradise of the Doc's garden within—reside various prominent, contrary notions: beginnings and endings; chaos and order; innocence and knowledge. But, equally as important to the Eden-like garden on the prairies, are unnamed contraries or "confusions" that exist by implication: the infinite and the finite; abundance and dearth; sanctuary and threat; "home" and exile; and humankind and "nature." *The Words of My Roaring*, which begins and ends *in media res*, is a case study in unnamed contraries. The issue of beginnings and endings to which Johnnie will refer throughout his narration, declares itself obliquely from the point at which the reader enters the

text and simultaneously enters into the story that has already begun; moreover, when the reader leaves, the story appears to be continuing on.

The ambiguous contraries that inform Kroetsch's Eden-like prairie garden also inform the character most aligned with it—Johnnie Backstrom. Aware and proud of his physical attributes on the one hand—he refers to his stature at least a dozen times, "I am six four in my stocking feet," he says (4,6,47,49), but he is stricken with guilt over inadequacies that his six foot four presence might belie. Johnnie's comic reference to his size in particular, evokes a comic character from the tall tale tradition of accenting physical attributes such as size become considerably larger in imagination. However, tall tales also "play off" attributes of characters' occupations or trades, featuring overblown lumberjacks, for example; moreover, they "play off" attributes of place.

Donald Cameron, in his introduction to *Johnnie Chinook*, provides historical context for Robert Gard's tales, which, like Kroetsch's, trade on the sociological as well as geographical and climatic history of place. A character named Hatfield figures in Gard's story of the historical American rainmaker who offered to provide up to forty inches of free rain for San Diego's Morena reservoir. Rainmakers—ambiguous characters by definition, and clearly prophets to some extent—were important figures of imagination especially in the time of drought. The enigma of the rainmaker is clearly a generative force in history and in fiction alike, as the rainmaker's promise, in a manner of speaking, keeps

the garden alive figuratively, if not literally. Literary rainmakers, prophets, and politicians are inevitably hyperbolic characters endowed with an abundance of words: Johnnie, although he paradoxically suffers an acute shortage of words at crucial times, is a composite of all three. Consider his question, "Mister, how would you like some rain?" (8), and the ensuing interest of the residents of the "Cree constituency" (39) in the aftermath, that casts him not only as a rainmaker but prophet and saviour as well.

Consider Johnnie as saviour in relation to the implication of the words used in the title of the novel that Kroetsch quotes—a phrase from Psalm 22: 1. Kroetsch expands the quotation in the epigraph, although he still employs only the second of two questions that the biblical King David cries out. The first part of the quotation comprises the quintessential question of the exile of humankind that began with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The question, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:I), effectively ties Johnnie to the biblical saviour, who cries out the same words in the pain of crucifixion. The question that refers to Christ's pain in living death, also relates to the paradoxical pain of living and dying of Johnnie's experience as well.⁸

The question, "Why art Thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" (Psalm 22:1), is as much about

⁸All of life is a progression toward death. Life is lived until the moment of not living succeeds it, hence, my term "living death."

speech as it is about silence. The words endow Johnnie with the characteristic ambiguity of the garden, blessed and blighted in abundance and in dearth. The quotation raises the question of ambivalence toward the god by whom Johnnie alternately expects to be heard and not heard. The words of the quotation comprise ambiguity: as question and statement they raise the issue of faith and doubt. Johnnie is, by demonstration and confession, a character who is ambivalent about the world, and no less, an ambiguous construct within it. Doc Murdoch, for instance, introduces as "little Johnnie Backstrom" (6) the same character who stands "nearly six four" (6) and who thinks of himself as "big John B" (16).

Large in stature and spirit, with a surfeit of confidence, Johnnie serves to give human dimension to the ambiguities of the garden. Consider the notion of abundance in relation to Johnnie's description of himself in the world—as a man "much given to celebration" (141). On the other hand, think of the notion of dearth in relation to a character alternately struck with fits of recrimination, insecurity, and self-doubt. The celebratory Johnnie is acutely aware of his own mortality. "My whole great body," he tells us, provides "an aching stinking reminder of my own ultimate doom" (144). The counter-narratives of exuberance and depression are to Johnnie as abundance and dearth are to the garden. Consider, for example, the implication of abundance in Johnnie's passionate approach to life and death, or his characteristic story-telling in light of his frequent confessions to being at a loss for words. Time and time again, Johnnie tells

us he is unable to speak,⁹ or that words always "fail [him] at the wrong time" (203)—the implication being that we have a narrator who is at a loss for words. And yet, at other times, for example, when Helen smiles, he recalls, "I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I had to talk" (58). His livelihood as funeral director or politician depends on his ability to speak eloquently to mourners and political constituents alike, and to do so largely in order to sustain hope and belief in the future. Think of the character in his ambivalence as a figure representative of the ambiguity in the prairie garden in the drought. The prairie garden, although blighted on the larger plane—metaphorically silenced by the lack of rain—still produces an abundance of wild roses and weeds. On the other hand, the prairie is blessed at the Murdoch place.

As Johnnie is a figure of ambiguity, he is also a figure of paradox. The words of his roaring are also synonymous with the pain of living death as Johnnie reflects on it during Jonah's funeral Mass. "Good God, life is short . . . my body cried," he recalls. "So live, it said. Live, live. Rage, roar" (144). The funeral Mass notwithstanding, when Johnnie uses the word "roaring," he has in mind, as well, his own body's wants. "Let me say I was a roaring success" (137), Johnnie says, for example, in oblique reference to having spent six nights in a row in the Doc's garden, making love to the Doc's daughter, Helen Persephone. Even at the funeral, or perhaps *especially* at the funeral, Johnnie focuses his thoughts on the affirmation of life

⁹ See 23, 35, 43, 77.

in the light of death. Johnnie's "success" (137) is only partly sexual—the other part rests in his temporary change in status from exile to indigene in the (Doc's) garden. The claim is not that Johnnie becomes indigenous in some way—it is, rather, that he becomes temporarily "natural" in the garden. His sense of the restorative becoming-whole, of coming into comfort in the garden, of being healed, in part, through "love's death" parallels (as it parodies) the biblical narrative of humankind's return to Paradise. In being identified with the words of both David and Christ, Johnnie becomes connected to the Old and New Testaments, and by extension, comes to represent the contraries of the biblical garden in Genesis and in the biblical text beyond.¹⁰ Johnnie's "roaring" in the prairie garden is the metaphoric roar of a voracious appetite and lust for life in the character—the undertaker-cum-politician, the rainmaker-cum-prophet, exile-cum-indigene.

Among the old world historical and literary traditions within *The Words of My Roaring* are various myths with connections to garden stories and larger-than-life characters therein—notably, the biblical garden story and the myth of Hades and Persephone, which Kroetsch exploits to construct his prairie version of an "indigenous" garden story, complete with the progeny of the under-world couple, Helen Persephone. The notions

¹⁰ The quotation from Psalms is only the most overt among Kroetsch's references to the Bible. Consider, for example, connections between John Judas Backstrom, and Christ. Johnnie is thirty-three, the same age as Christ when He died. The figures are prophets to varying extents, and both "lead" their people out of the wilderness.

of exile and loss are as integral to literary tradition as are notions of the pastoral in which characters experience loss and recuperation. From a theological point of view, the condition of exile remains to the moment of reconciliation and restoration in the garden of Paradise. As Johnnie puts it, "Helen made me whole again Helen who kissed me." (131). In the manner of a mother's kiss healing a hurt, Helen's kiss heals Johnnie to the point that he pronounces himself restored. "'Helen,' I said, it's all gone, and a good riddance of bad rubbish. I'm going to start over" (132).

Johnnie's restoration in the Doc's pastoral garden, implies that Johnnie is in exile when he is outside the Eden-like garden. Kroetsch brings the exile into the "new" pastoral world of the prairies in the ambiguous figure of Johnnie Backstrom, who feels out of place in the larger prairie garden, but at home in the smaller one. At the same time, Kroetsch brings into the new pastoral world of his creation the (also ambiguous) prairie landscape that is in a metaphoric exile from literary tradition by dint of its not having its own primordial narratives in that tradition. It is emphatically not the case that the prairie has had no primordial narratives. Rather, primordial prairie narratives have hitherto not been a part of the European, English language literary tradition. I propose that Kroetsch brings the exiled character and his new world landscape of the prairies into garden place that is ambiguously reflective of both the contemporary new world present and the old world past, and in so-

doing, gains for the region an entrance into the larger literary tradition.

In *The Words of My Roaring*, Kroetsch introduces the notion of prairie garden and with it the idea of the prairie as a garden by means of a place name with an epithet wherein he "plants" his rose: "Notikeewin. The Wild Rose City" (10, 27). The wild rose is one of the markers of place Kroetsch exploits in his construction of the prairie garden. Alberta's indigenous provincial flower, the Wild Rose, grows in profusion not only in Alberta, but also across the prairies and the great plains, in grass and parklands alike.¹¹ Shrub-like, fragrant, and prickly, the Wild Rose cedes its delicate and various white and pink blossoms to the wind and rain. To European, as well as to twentieth-century eyes, the Rose, as opposed to the Wild Rose, is an icon of civilization. Kroetsch exploits our ambiguous understanding of the Rose, a plant that is both visually and sensually appealing but, at the same time, repellent—covered with myriad tiny thorns that protect it—to subtly further the notion of ambiguity in the garden. The Rose is traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary. It appears diversely in literature as the Celestial Rose in Dante's *Paradiso*, as the "Multifoliate rose," for example, in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" (1331, l. 64), and in ballads, folksongs, and fairy tales throughout English language literature: it is synonymous with the notion of the garden in literature and visual art alike.

¹¹ The Wild Rose was adopted as Alberta's provincial flower in the height of the Depression. See *Colombo's Canadian References*, 456.

The naming of Notikeewin as the Wild Rose City is tantamount to an oxymoron in the vein of the words "living death." Aritha Van Herk, in her "Biocritical Essay" on Robert Kroetsch, notes that word "battle" is the English equivalent of the Cree "Notikeewin" (xxii). Not to be missed in the word "battle" is the implication of death. On the other hand, within the name of the place, Notikeewin, and its epithet, "The Wild Rose City," resides the contrary implication of life: battles are life and death situations. The name Notikeewin, then, juxtaposed with the wild rose comprises a veiled reference to one of the primary concerns of the garden narrative: beginnings and endings. Not to be missed is the implication of Notikeewin being a site of other beginnings and endings that will ensue as the result of the election that casts the Doc and Johnnie (surrogate father and "son"), as political foes in competition for the position of MLA (26). Given that there is an election underway, the name of the town takes on parodic political significance. To an English speaker's ear, Notikeewin sounds like a political pundit's comment about an electoral seat of little importance, which the pundit might dismiss by calling it "not a key win." Located in the novel's fictive electoral "Cree constituency" in the rural Alberta prairie, Notikeewin, like its historical counterparts of similar size and influence across the Canadian prairies, would have been of negligible importance to all except the few who lived there. At an election time, the words "not a key win" might apply to any small towns in the political hinterlands beyond the

more densely populated cities that collectively determine the outcome of more regional elections.

In the novel, ambiguity not only stems from the garden, but also from the ethos surrounding it—for instance, in Kroetsch's creation of a Canadian "east-meets-west" in politics and in the garden. Consider the Doc's garden, the lush prairie paradise of Johnnie's experience, with its ties to the East that Johnnie recognizes viscerally. As Johnnie has it,

The smell of that garden at night . . . wasn't a prairie smell, dry and stringent, parching the insides of your nose. It was an Eastern smell; lush, a green smell, heavy enough to be seen. (158)

In that garden, as Johnnie remarks to Helen Persephone, the Doc has managed to create "a little bit of the East" right "in his own backyard" (158). As much as the smell is that of a lush garden, it is also the metaphoric smell of affluence and the East with which the Doc, his daughter H.P. and to a lesser extent, Johnnie—who spent twelve years there—are associated. As historian David Eliot writes in "William Aberhart: Right of Left?" the cleft in the relationship of the Canadian prairie West to Eastern Canada gained widespread recognition in the province of Alberta in William Aberhart's basic social credit argument that there was "poverty in the midst of plenty" (13) and in his observation that plenty resided in the East. Eliot reminds us that Aberhart, who "began to weave his social credit ideas into his religious radio broadcasts . . ." (13), directed remarks against Canadian financiers in terms such as "the Fifty Big shots" and the "high-

mucky-mucks" (20). For his part, J. G. Applecart, Aberhart's counterpart and Johnnie's party leader, makes reference to "the Fifty big shots" (35) and the Fifty Thieves" (36). As Johnnie observes, Applecart's speech on the radio connects "Satan and all of hell with the dirty Eastern millionaires" (37). Moreover, Applecart rips "into the betrayals of Christ and his holy principles" (37), which, as Johnnie notes, has "a lot to do with the price of wheat and hogs," in other words, the produce of the prairie garden (37). "Satan and all of hell" (37), of course, forge one of the links to the Apocalypse.

Johnnie's impromptu "hind tit speech" (114), in which he quotes both Applecart and Revelation, comprises a companion scene to Applecart's radio broadcast. When he begins to speak, the words of Applecart's Sunday broadcast come to him: "The first angel sounded . . . and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood and they were cast upon earth; and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up" (33; Rev. 8.VII). Johnnie, here, in his "first major speech" (108) as a political candidate, casts the experience of living in the blighted prairie garden as a prairie Apocalypse given substance in the fall of the rodeo clown and the crippling prairie drought. Moreover, in quoting from the Book of Revelation, Johnnie implies the connection between the prophecies of Revelation and the prairie garden. "And I beheld another beast," Johnnie says, using the words of Revelation, "coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon" (108; Rev. 13: 11). "A beast came out of the earth and that clown . . . stood right

up to that beast" (109). Johnnie's rhetoric here connects the bull that killed the rodeo clown with the biblical beast that further evolves into the metaphor for the "big money boys, the grabbers from the east" (110). The words lead to Johnnie's declamation that it is time to stand up to being "shoved and hauled by the high-mucky-mucks . . . by the plutocrat millionaires from the East" (109).

The connection between the Apocalypse and catastrophic state of the garden in the prairies is undeniable: in the prairie garden "third" of the earth (33), there are neither trees nor green grass—except in the Doc's garden. And Johnnie, with his final quotation from Revelation, reiterates the notion that the prairie garden is a wilderness of biblical proportions: "And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given to him to scorch all men with fire" (112; Rev. 15:8). "I shook my fists at that blazing hammering sky," Johnnie recalls (112). "'We are afflicted,' Johnnie declaims, 'Afflicted and plagued'" The prophecies of Revelation seem to have come to pass in the prairie garden, and, Johnnie, who is to some extent a prophet himself in the prairie garden, has been instrumental in making the connections. But just as the issue in the novel is not Eden or Apocalypse, but both rather, the prairie is neither garden nor wilderness, but both. The same ambiguities that stem from the biblical garden of creation govern its residents. For instance, the presence of the Adam-figure in its ambiguity—part god, part human—is central to Eden and its Eden-like prairie counter-part. In Kroetsch's garden, the Doc, the man

to whom Johnnie looks as both father and mentor, the man who cares for the living whereas Johnnie cares for the dead, serves as a parody of the Old Testament God of the garden. The Doc is a fool-god whom Johnnie likens to Santa Claus (7), "up on the fancy platform," "ranting on . . . to three hundred people who bowed before him, the men in overalls with patches on the patches, the women in bloomers made of flour sacks" (7).¹² The powerful Doc Murdoch, MLA, however, fills the role of a god in the garden—figuratively as politician, more literally as the healing physician associated with life and death, and finally, as gardener in his own prairie Eden within the larger prairie.

The Doc's speech at the election rally comprises, in part, a somewhat playful, parodic ceremonial oratory. Consider the terms in which he acknowledges Johnnie's presence in the community hall: "My worthy opponent," the Doc proclaims, "has come to bury us not to praise us" (4).¹³ His words echo those of Shakespeare's Mark Antony, Caesar's political opponent, who came "to bury Caesar, not to praise him" (Julius Caesar III. 2. 74). In evoking Mark Antony's address to the plebeians in Shakespeare's play, the Doc, from the height of the stage position further elevates himself to emperor by implication and rhetoric. At the same time, he implicitly compares Johnnie to Mark Antony, the figure victorious in history and in

¹² The description evokes T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men," with its images of "dry voices" and "wind in dry grass" (1313) in a blighted world.

¹³ See Julius Caesar III.ii.74

Shakespearean theatre. Whereas in Roman times political figures wield power akin to that of the gods, in the novel's contemporary time, the implication is that the Doc wields similar power. That he wields the power in the prairie garden casts him as something of a god-figure therein—a notion reinforced by Johnnie's further descriptions of him.

In Johnnie's construction of the Doc as a god-like figure in the garden, Johnnie likens him, on the one hand, to the god-figure in Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, and on the other, to a chiseled sculpture of a Greek god.¹⁴ As Johnnie has it, the "old Doc was not a tall man, but he was big; he had a presence that nearly crowded his banker friends off the stage . . . his thick white hair fell over his forehead, his pink face took the light like a slab of gouged and polished granite" (5).¹⁵ The description brings to mind Greek statuary as well as Michelangelo's fresco, *The Creation of Adam*. Like the God of Genesis, Michelangelo's God creates an Adam in his own image. Similarly, Kroetsch's creation parodies Michelangelo's: Doc Murdoch also creates Johnnie in his own image. Johnnie's descriptions of the Doc here provide a counterpoint for Johnnie's descriptions of himself as the Doc's "first-born" (22, 23, 24, 25). Johnnie is the Doc's surrogate son, with his own "huge

¹⁴ See representative images of Michelangelo's frescoes and sculptures in H. W. Janson (496-500).

¹⁵ Again "The Hollow Men," comes to mind. Consider the words, "Here the stone images / are raised" (l. 41, 42), and "prayers to broken stone" (l. 51).

craggy head and fair hair," (4) and his "amazing set of perfect teeth" (9). The word "craggy" (4), evokes an image of stone or rock (or granite)—the material of sculptures. Moreover, Johnnie is connected to the god by means of his "fair hair," with its metaphoric suggestion of privilege, and the further hint of perfection evoked by the suggestion of his own godliness.

Johnnie's narrative version of father / son likeness between him and the Doc, gives rise to the question of whether the Doc might even be Johnnie's father.

As much as Johnnie is a parody of the Doc—as "son," and as would-be politician, he is a parody of a self-made man in prairie literary tradition, as well. His character evokes the self-made characters of F.P. Grove, for example, who appear overly large in the prairie garden. As Laurence Ricon notes, "man in the prairie is a giant, strong and self-reliant, struggling determinedly in a barren land" (39). For Johnnie, the barren land is, in part, the political riding he wishes to cultivate in order to win his seat as MLA.

Although the images of presiding gods and the sons created in their likenesses contribute to notions of the Garden of Eden and its prairie counterpart, the gardens have other important attributes in common as well, among them, the snake. In Eden, the serpent is rather singularly cast as the agent of the Fall. Thus, one might say that Johnnie is the snake in the Doc's garden. However, A singular reading of Johnnie as the snake in the creation story of Genesis delimits the possibility of an attractive, energetic, ribald, randy, and relatively unrestrained

character who is life-affirming and celebratory; moreover, he is one who, in the end, becomes a saviour, in the manner of other larger-than life literary figures. In Homer's *Odysseus*, for example, the hero's energy-giving lusts drive his narrative. Think of Blake's notion that "contraries spring from what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason," while, considerably more attractive, Evil "is the active springing from Energy" (Plate 3). On the one hand, Johnnie is the undeniably attractive Evil. On the other hand, in his narrative to which ambiguity is absolutely central, Johnnie is also the Good. He is a prophet and saviour as much as he is a Satan.

Writers such as Milton, in *Paradise Lost* (Book IX), and Blake, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, develop the snake in the garden into an attractive character of considerable guile. When God asks Adam about eating the forbidden fruit, Adam defers to Eve, who in turn, defers to the serpent whom she says "beguiled" her (Genesis 3, 13). Kroetsch's Johnnie is nothing if not beguiling. Consider the Doc's declamatory introduction of Johnnie that casts him as the proverbial snake: "whereas my opponent has wormed his way in here uninvited . . . [w]hereas he has *crept and crawled* in here to make us cough at the reek of his grouching and complaining" (4). As though to confirm the Doc's inference, Johnnie—part beloved son and part serpent—uses the same terms to describe himself leaving the rally as the Doc uses to describe his arrival: "I galloped straight back to the beer parlour from which I had *crept and crawled*" in the first place (9). The words "worm" (4), "*crept and crawled*" (9) and "reeked"

(4) evoke notions of life on the underside of the garden where there is generally less sunlight. Johnnie is an under-taker: in a manner of speaking he lives on the dark side of the world by dint of occupation. He has been cast on the side of the underworld in the manner of Hades from the beginning, both in relation to his profession, as one who takes under, and to his beloved Helen Persephone.

Consider the parallel narratives of the drought and Helen's sojourn in Eastern Canada. Like the goddess Persephone, H.P. returns home after a period away, and her presence heralds a new period of growth. In Johnnie's narrative, prior to Helen Persephone's return, the garden of the west has suffered an extended period of drought that finds its metaphoric parallel in Johnnie himself as he suffers the emotional drought of his unsatisfying marriage. At the end of his narrative, like the return of spring with which the goddess Persephone is associated, both Johnnie's emotional drought and the drought in the garden have perhaps come to an end. On the other hand, with the sheer volume of the long-awaited rainfall, one new cataclysmic event—rain—might simply supercede the existing one(drought).¹⁶ In Johnnie's narrative, the arrival in the garden of both H.P. and

¹⁶ Rain does not necessarily put an end a drought. During the historical Dirty Thirties the problem of the blighted garden was not the total absence of rain or even the accumulated effects of insufficient moisture for years on end. Other factors contributing to the drought conditions of those years included wind, farming methods, the lack of awareness (really a lack of knowledge) of the importance of conservation of both land and water. See Walter Nemanishen for an inclusive discussion of drought on the Canadian prairies.

the rain might portend the recovery of Eden in the Eden-like prairie garden and in the Doc's garden besides. On the other hand, Johnnie tells the farmers "if I were you I'd start shopping for a boat . . . I'd start building an ark" (15): clearly, the rain could also portend a flood.

The two women in Johnnie's life provide an example of unnamed, or deceptive, contraries that come to light from the moment of Johnnie's identification of them by name. In a manner of speaking, both of the women in Johnnie's life essentially have the same name: Elaine is derivative of Helen (Gr: torch, light), the name that throughout the literature of Greek myth is synonymous with female beauty, sexual attraction, and power. Cast as contrary figures of restraint and passion, or, in Blakean terms, Reason and Energy, the two women are more alike than it might seem. Both women wield considerable power over the alternately over-blown and bumbling hero-anti-hero of the novel. Helen's power is largely seductive, Elaine's largely moral. Both, to a degree, are cast in the role of muse. Both women have considerable strength of character, and both support Johnnie, albeit in different ways. Both Elaine and Helen are associated with "taking under" and, moreover, both are associated with fertility and the creation of life in the prairie garden blessed and blighted. Whereas Helen inspires kinesthetically and emotionally, however, Elaine, in the end, inspires spiritually and intellectually, largely because she expresses her faith in him. "You can beat them without rain," (174) she says of

Johnnie's electoral adversaries, and she encourages him to be honest. "Tell them it didn't rain," she counsels (174).

The women are no less figures of ambiguity than Johnnie himself. Helen, for example, for all her associations with Eastern culture and affluence, is closely aligned with nature: the world around her seems to be green. She is spontaneous, passionate, and "natural" in the garden. She represents, on the one hand, the world Johnnie himself has returned from after his twelve-year sojourn. Elaine, on the other hand, is a figure of prudish restraint, signalled, for example, by the straight hair she keeps in curlers—the "aluminum junkyard" (30) she wears in her hair—in preparation for going to church. She appears to lack spontaneity altogether. However, Elaine comes from a plutocratic background no less than Helen—the Burkharts hold the farm implement dealership in the district. And although Johnnie does not appear to cast his Elaine as a goddess figure in the manner of Helen, his confession to having thought that "even an archangel couldn't get this one pregnant" (148) elevates her to the realm of icon as well. Moreover, Elaine's pregnancy stands as proof positive of the presence of spontaneity and fertility in Johnnie's life—the same elements that keep him returning to the Doc's garden.

With H.P., the goddess-figure of the Doc's walled prairie garden, Johnnie experiences joy and abundance sufficient to transport him to another world. Aritha Van Herk notes in her biocritical essay on Robert Kroetsch that Helen's role as Persephone "completes his [Johnnie's] as an undertaker [keeper of the dead]"

(xxiii). Indeed, the life-affirming Helen appears to be more the ideal match for the voracious, exuberant Johnnie than does her counterpart in name and strength, Elaine, whom Johnnie does not see in the same light. Elaine, with her constant carping, is to Johnnie a "bundle of consistencies . . . all straight hair at one end, a twist or two at the other" (208)—until she expresses her faith in him.

It is Helen, part goddess by dint of her mythical parentage, who draws Johnnie from the blighted garden into the blessed garden. At the same time, however, she actually becomes, as Johnnie puts it, "the garden of my soul; a forest tangled and scented. A wild forest. She was the turf and torment of all my raucous love" (208). In Kroetsch's novel, Helen Persephone serves to evoke the garden myth wherein Hades, the Greek god of the underworld, one who takes under, who steals Persephone and has to release her according to his promise that she might spend part of her life on earth. Her return to earth represents renewed fertility. With her return, come the spring rains and the greening of agricultural and domestic gardens. In Helen Persephone's return to the prairie garden, she, too, is associated with gardens, the return of fertility, water, and the colour green. As Johnnie himself is synonymous with the prairie garden in blessing, so is Helen, who, in Johnnie's words, is "full-grown and blooming like a rose, a saskatoon bush in spring" (48). In his narrative, the first time Johnnie sees her in the book's present time, Helen is pouring a glass of water for the

Doc. The car she drives is a new green Chevrolet with its implications of affluence coming out of the East. Consider the ambivalence H.P. generates in Johnnie. "She was so beautiful," he says, "she struck me into wonder" (8). The implication is that he has been "struck dumb," that is, speechless, but on the other hand, that Johnnie claims that when he is with Helen "I couldn't keep my mouth shut," (58) indicates that Helen also propels him into speech.

I had to tell her about my trip to the East to work in the harvest fields. The scent of clover rich and sweet scenting the whole air. The grass falling heavy and green when the sickle hit it. Water--so much water in the air and grass and ponds and brooks, it blurred the whole world a blue green; and the old snake fences that spoke of tremendous forests; and . . . 'Eden . . . the green lush old Eden.' (58)

For Johnnie, the wonder of the world in the East rests in the fertility and abundance of the garden that he experiences in Helen's presence as he both talks about Eden, and, to a degree, lives it metaphorically. The Eden of the Canadian East--the garden blessed with water--stands in distinct contrast to the garden of the west, blighted in the absence of water.

Helen's association with the prairie garden derives, in part, through Johnnie's connecting her to the rose and saskatoon bush in the natural prairie garden. Her association with the underworld derives, in part, through her connection to a particular flower as well. Of all the flowers in the Doc's

garden, she chooses to give Johnnie an asphodel, the traditional flower of Elysium. The asphodel also becomes anthropomorphized in the garden when he and H.P. meet there. Johnnie recalls,

We coupled, me like a hippopotamus; we met and were joined,
the stars wheeling, the night hushed into admiration; we
coupled and were one, Helen and I, my asphodel rudely
afloat on the sloshing waves. (167)

"Hushed into admiration" (167), even the night is anthropomorphized in this scene evoking a baptism and rebirth in the Doc's garden pool.

In myth, the asphodel is symbolic of death and mortality. It is the plant that covers the plain of the Elysian fields, the dwelling place of the shades in Hades. According to Edward Tripp, in *The Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology*, "in spite of the romantic sounding name, which has inspired poets to charming fancies, asphodel is, in fact, a singularly unattractive weed" (108). Tripp surmises that the asphodel was "no doubt chosen by the Greeks as appropriate to an underworld existence because it is a ghostly gray and incapable of giving pleasure as was the life of the shades" (108). In employing the symbolic underworld flower, Kroetsch here actively draws on literary tradition of Homer (*The Odyssey*, Book IX), and Milton (*Paradise Lost*, Book IX), both of whom make use of the flower.

Perhaps as inspiring a source for Kroetsch is William Carlos Williams's poem, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," (1917).¹⁷ Indeed, as it relates to Johnnie's experience in the Doc's garden, part of Williams's piece might have been written or spoken by Johnnie himself in describing how he felt in the Doc's garden. Consider the following lines of Williams's poem in relation to Johnnie's sudden loquaciousness with Helen:

A thousand topics

in an apple blossom.

The generous earth itself

gave us lief.

The whole world /

became my garden! (145)

In the Doc's garden, Johnnie similarly feels the transformation of his world to the point that he feels he is "in another world" (156). With visible and visceral evidence of fertility all around him, and his own proverbial personal drought ended with the restrictions of his daily existence temporarily set aside, Johnnie finds in the garden "nothing around him but happiness" (165). The other world in which he finds himself (literally and metaphorically) is a contemporary revision of the pastoral world that is linked to nature and to love that Johnnie finds in the garden.

¹⁷ In a telephone conversation Kroetsch recalled having liked the poem and having taught it in his classes at the university perhaps around the same time as he was working on the novel (May/04).

As Adam comes into knowledge in the garden through Eve, so Johnnie comes into knowledge in the Eden-like garden in the prairies through Helen Persephone. Unlike Adam, however, Johnnie gains sanctuary and ultimately leaves the garden voluntarily—healed and restored. Johnnie raises the question of knowledge in the garden. Before spending seven days with her, Johnnie claims, he “did not know an asphodel from a hawthorn” (165).

What blossoms did I know?” he asks rhetorically.

“Stinkweed, and maybe the shooting star. Buffalo beans in the springtime. Wolf Willow. Pin cherry. Foxtail. Does quack grass blossom? Does pigweed bloom? (165)

Johnnie’s Adamic act of naming the plants of the larger prairie garden, while he is actually in the lush Eden-like prairie garden effectively brings them into it. By dint of their naming, Johnnie evokes the plants’ presence and draws into question the naming of prairie space, in general. The plants he lists are among the least promising of “literary” plants, that grow in a prairie space not commonly named as garden at all.

The small list of indigenous prairie plants that attests to Johnnie’s visceral response in the garden appeals to four of the five senses. The list parodies traditional European “literary” plants such as roses, lilies, amaryllis, or crocus with their own properties of visual appeal and / or scent. Prairie stinkweed is self-explanatory, and wolf willow is recognized by its pungent scent; the shooting star appeals to both the sense of sight and sound (and no less to our sense of wonder); the pin cherry

appeals to our experience of tasting cherries sweet or bitter; and quack grass suggests noise or perhaps a craziness in its enthusiastic growth. The shooting star plant is particularly appropriate given the prominence of stars wheeling "as they pleased" in the garden scene (166-67). But there is more than visceral appeal to the list of names. The names of buffalo beans, wolf willow, foxtail, and pigweed conjure images of animals that, however banal, are nonetheless an essential part of the prairie Eden. For those uninitiated to the prairies, the names evoke curiosity about the history of place and the nature of naming: why *pigweed*, for example, or *buffalo beans*? All of the named plants exist on the prairies, including the buffalo bean, which has various names (among them golden pea and false lupine).

The plants that Johnnie knew prior to his experience with Helen Persephone in the garden are indigenous prairie plants commonly designated undesirable because of their prodigious growth—another irony, given the paucity of growth anywhere in the prairie outside the Doc's garden. But by virtue of Johnnie's question, "What *blossoms* did I know?" (165), he recasts the weeds as *flowers* and, at the same time, endows them with aesthetic value. If the weeds gain aesthetic value in becoming flowers, the implication is that the space in which they grow is a garden. Refiguring the weeds as flowers, or wilderness space as garden, or indeed, on a larger plane, refiguring wilderness space as garden destabilizes the relationship between the two as opposites and alters the nature of their co-dependency on each other.

I have tried in this discussion to locate my argument in the notion of the ambiguity of place derived primarily from the notion of the garden, as opposed to wilderness, largely because critical readings of the prairie place have consistently, and almost exclusively, cast the prairie as wilderness or wasteland. Kroetsch's use of the garden is a demonstration of the surviving, albeit revised, pastoral tradition with a lineage dating back to Antiquity. *The Words of My Roaring*, as it comprises the prairies as a garden-blessed and blighted-owes its construction, in part, to the literary tradition that the novel (as an emerging voice of prairie place) seeks to enter. That being said, however, I propose that, as much as it may be indebted to European cultural lineage, the prairie garden bears characteristics that are distinctively its own. Its contraries and ambiguities are inevitably inscribed by the landscape of the Canadian prairie West. Doc Murdoch's Eden-like prairie garden, the garden blessed, serves as an antidote to the "dry, sterile prairie" (133) Laurence Ricou finds in the prairie writing he examines in *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*. For Ricou, the landscape in *The Words of My Roaring*

is bewildering, almost nightmarish: determinedly straight roads leading nowhere; modern communications futilely trying to bridge the great emptiness; the relentless sun torturing man with his impotence. (133)

Ricou's statement that derives largely from close and sustained examination of a body of realistic fiction demonstrates one reading of Kroetsch's text. Readings of prairie landscape as

particularly harsh and unforgiving, however, give rise to a question concerning the imagining of place that Kroetsch raises in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*:

Might it not be, that we look back on the experiences [of prairie place] as having been . . . harsh . . . because the realistic (or even naturalistic) mode of fiction pictured it so? (5).

Ricou remarks in the introduction to one of the few books devoted to the criticism of prairie writing, *Vertical Man Horizontal World*, that "The myth of the garden which Leo Marx has shown to be central to the American experience has only very limited application to a country where the more usual themes are "the severity of climate or the unsuitability of the land for cultivation" (x-xi). Re-examining those themes in the light of the garden, as *The Words of My Roaring* demonstrates, casts them in an entirely different light. Kroetsch's presentation of the prairie landscape in the form of the garden proposes that there are other alternatives to the perception of prairie space.

The Prairie Is a Garden

For the imagination, the concept of garden can be a richly creative force. Roger Evans

. . . not empty this space is not empty Dennis Cooley

In examining *As For Me and My House, Who Has Seen the Wind, The Stone Angel, Wolf Willow, and The Words of My Roaring*, I have uncovered a secret garden: the prairie garden. Eden-like in its vast and unlimited dimension and character, the prairie garden is hidden away metaphorically, existing so inconspicuously that, with the exception of a few literary critics who have written about it, it escapes notice all together. All gardens—especially the prairie garden that was once approached as 'new' and hitherto unused space open to possibility—are constructs of human imagination.

Gardens are repositories of hope and dream. As Don Gayton contends in *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*, the prairie is also "a construct of imagination, an idea of place, one coveted by immigrants and botanists. A destroyer of painters and spawner of writers" (7). Considering even Ross's blighted prairie landscape as a garden offers a different understanding of the prairie landscape commonly portrayed, as Don Gayton observes, as "indifferent and often brutal to those who live in it" (7).

My title for this thesis, "Imagine the Prairies," is an invitation to look at the prairies, which has hitherto been

looked at in myriad other ways, through the "lens" of a garden. It is an important invitation for a number of reasons. To date there has been no sustained statement about the garden in prairie literature. Prairie texts that have been written about at some length have been thought of in other terms. Deborah Keahey points out in her thoughtful statement on prairie writing, *Making It Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* (1998), that "The notion of place has long played a central role in discussions of prairie literature" (4). Place, as Keahey points out "has overwhelmingly been defined in narrow deterministic terms as 'the land' or the natural physical environment" (4).

The prairie place has also been defined in terms of the myth that grew out of a particular period of time and particular 'natural' and environmental conditions: the 1930s and the drought that contributed, in part, to the now-mythical time--'The Dirty Thirties.' In other words, in terms of its literary construction, the prairie has been over-determined by the depression myth. Prairie literature has also long been considered a 'regional literature,' the word regional often used disparagingly to mean minor, unimportant, or inconsequential. In part, this notion is owing to the perception of prairie literature's relative youth in relation to other world literature. But prairie writing considers place that is as old any other place in the world. The perception of the prairies as 'new' resides in the tradition of the post-contact literary construction of place in terms of the garden-by-Europeans--that began in the late seventeenth century.

Despite the garden's considerable presence in a number of now-canonical prairie texts, there has been a disproportionately small amount of critical response to it. The garden is an important version of prairie land because of what it is—a vast 'natural' garden. On the other hand, in my understanding, the garden is an important version of prairie land because of what it is not. Envisioning prairie place as garden distances it from definition as commercial agricultural space in general. The gardens I examine in particular prairie texts have been cultivated as sites of possibility, hope, and dream—not as sites of failure or blighted wilderness as is a commonly held view of the prairies.

The 'dirty thirties' were so-named not only for wind-borne silt that filled dry air in the lengthy and devastating drought, but because they were 'dirty' in economic terms as well, following in the wake of severe economic depression. Through the years those two events have come together to form a single myth that continues to over-determine the literary image of the prairies. The prairie has long been thought of in economic terms, and indeed, it is difficult to separate the notion of garden from the notion of agriculture. But there is another important myth that informs the literary image of the prairie: the myth of the garden, a myth that is irrevocably a part of the place of post-contact Western European settlement to the present day. It is the myth that gives the prairie garden a place in the continuum of the construction of the garden in literary tradition.

The texts I examine were published in the post-depression era between 1941 and 1976. Roy Daniells's remark about Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* holds for all of the books I examine, as they

present the prairies of the drought and the depression, the long succession of years between the two wars when the farmer and all who depended upon him found everything against them. (ix)

Daniells goes on to describe as "indelible" (ix) "that grim period, lengthened against all experience" (ix).

That the representative literary gardens of Sinclair Ross, W.O. Mitchell, Margaret Laurence, Wallace Stegner, and Robert Kroetsch derive largely from 'the dirty thirties' makes them all the more interesting. The salient impression of the prairies during the depression era is predicated on an environment that is unsympathetic, indifferent, and at times even malevolent toward the humans who would live there. But a reading of hardship, privation, and failed fertility is insufficient because there is more to the literary construction of the prairie than that reading allows. Deborah Keahey looks and finds home; I look and find the garden—with all the implications of any literary garden from Homer in 850 BCE, through to the present day in European and Canadian writing.

I find the idealized garden and I find the dream of paradise repeated even in narratives of failed fertility that permeate the prairie writing I have examined. The gardens are constructed of contraries such as innocence and knowledge,

abundance and dearth. The texts I have examined are reflective of the complexities of the prairie environment for which the garden is such an apt metaphor.

In my reading of the prairie as garden, I am opening a different understanding of prairie place. My research shows that the writers of the works I consider do not hold a monologic view of prairie place—the view that critics of those works tend to propound. Ross, Mitchell, Laurence, Stegner, and Kroetsch have taken a more holistic approach to the literary construction of the prairie than the critics have tended to realize: in short, the garden has been in the texts all along, and has simply gone unnoticed. All gardens are necessarily imaginary, but they also make interactions within the "real" world—and serve as a complex and interesting metaphor for the new idea of belonging in place, or as Deborah Keahey puts it, being at home. All gardens are conceived in imagination, in the mind's eye, so to speak, "vision" being at least as imaginary as it is physical.

Henry Kelsey (1790) may have been one of the first Europeans to imagine the prairie place as garden. Certainly, he imagined a particular part of the prairie in terms of his perception of garden according to his experience of garden on two planes: physical and imaginary. As Kelsey's comment on ground that appears to him to have been "Artificially / made (7)" demonstrates that he was familiar with landscape gardens, so his poetry demonstrates his familiarity with literary convention—and the imagining of the garden so prevalent in literary tradition.

The gardens in the texts I have examined are there for aesthetic and spiritual purpose. To a large extent, they represent a cultural ideal—promise, hope, dream—that continues to inform prairie texts. Some of the concern in the writing is for the ephemeral. Ross's poppies in the blighted garden and Mitchell's butterflies in the natural prairie garden, for example, become metaphors for the vanishing prairie—metaphors that takes on new meaning in light of concern for the severely damaged eco-system. My reading the prairie as garden, beginning with "post-contact" Europeans gives prairie writing a home, so to speak: it finds a place for prairie texts in the continuum of the traditional literary garden—a continuum that continues to this day.

My research into the garden in prairie writing reveals that considerable work remains to be done on the literary construction of the garden in prose and in the long poem. Perhaps less prominent in recognition and intent than Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, several other prairie long poems also construct the prairie as garden, among them Helen Hawley's "Grasshopper," Eli Mandel's *Out of Place*, Jon Whyte's *Homage Henry Kelsey*, Lorna Crozier's "The Sex Lives of Vegetables," and Dennis Cooley's elegiac long poems *fielding*, *Irene*, and particularly, *This Only Home*. The construction of the garden continues in prairie prose as well, for example, in Thomas King's *Green Grass Running Water* which re-invents Eden from an aboriginal point of view, or Sharon Butala's book, *The Perfection of the Morning*.

The texts I bring to attention in relation to garden imagery are not meant to be considered representative of prairie literature in general. With the exception of Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, the contemporary prairie long poem has not been included in my discussion, but, as I have pointed out, representations of the garden can also be found in several other long poems. The failed garden is at the core of Anne Marriott's long poem, *The Wind Our Enemy*, a poem that was among the first significant literary pieces about the depression in the Canadian prairies. Helen Hawley's long poem, "Grasshopper," is one of the more recent pieces to address the prairies in drought.

As the work on this dissertation comes to an end, I look forward to related projects on the same subject: the garden in prairie writing. I plan to resume work on the long poem and cast the light of the garden particularly on prairie long poems, perhaps beginning with *Malcolm's Katie*, part of the setting of which D.M.R. Bentley suggests may have been Manitoba. I would also like to examine the garden in King and Butala, writers of my own generation for whom the apocalypse perhaps seems as close now, as it did for the earlier generations of critics whose work I examine here.

Reading the prairie as garden opens for the prairie region the possibility of critical dialogue with the stories of the larger literary world. Eden is just the beginning.

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