

THE PRIMEVAL ELEMENT IN THE PRAIRIE NOVELS OF  
FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
and Research  
The University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
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May 1966



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This thesis concerns itself with the novels of Grove written between 1912 when he arrived on the prairie and the publication of Fruits of the Earth in 1933. I have attempted to show that Grove chose the Canadian prairie because what he wanted to write about offered itself in this environment. Grove came with a knowledge of literature, the symbolism of which he wished to express against a primeval setting. He brought together his immense characterizations and the only environment grand and primeval enough to serve as a stage for them. I believe that his knowledge of literature has emerged in the form of archetypal symbolism. In addition Grove has written with a clearly defined view of literary procedure: to be a work of art literature must strive to mirror a more or less universal human reaction to life. He saw the writer as an artist who, rather than photographing or recording real life, selected details from that life to "body forth" in a work of art what he thought of it all. Grove refers to this literary procedure as realism. Finally I wish to show that the view of life mirrored is a tragic view: of conflict and triumph mixed with defeat. Grove has blended the tragic hero of Aristotle with the problem play situation of Ibsen. His tragic heroes are men who have attempted to achieve the unattainable, but they have exulted, like Prometheus, in their defiance of the gods and in achieving as much of their dream as they did achieve. I have discussed these three aspects of Grove's writing with reference to his four published prairie novels: Fruits of the Earth, Our Daily Bread, Settlers of the Marsh, and The Yoke of Life.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I gratefully acknowledge my debt to Professor Doris Saunders of the University of Manitoba Department of English for her helpful suggestions and her careful reading of the manuscript during the writing of the thesis.

I also wish to acknowledge the assistance given me by Mr. David Foley of the Elizabeth Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba in allowing me to use the Grove Collection in the Rare Book Room of the Library.

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## INTRODUCTION

Frederick Philip Grove arrived in Haskett, Manitoba, in the year 1912 at the age of forty-one, or forty or thirty-nine depending on whether he was born in 1871, 1872, or 1873 as indicated by Mrs. Grove on a postcard to Carleton Stanley.

Leonard was born Oct. 14, 1930. As for Phil's date of birth—as I said once before according to our marriage certificate he was born neither '72 nor '71 but 1873. That is all the help I can be on that question. But some day I'll tell you a funny story.<sup>1</sup>

From 1912 until after the tragic death of his daughter, May, in 1927 Grove lived and wrote on the Canadian prairie. What he did for the first forty years of his life is immaterial; whether he lived as he has described his life in his autobiography, In Search of Myself, or whether his remark in a letter to Carleton Stanley<sup>2</sup> suggesting that he might delete the European section of his autobiography indicates that his first forty years might not have been as he has described them, does not change the author, the creator of Abe Spalding, Niels Lindstedt, John Elliot and Len Sterner. Whether Philip

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<sup>1</sup>Mrs. Grove, postcard to Carleton Stanley, postmarked Simcoe, June 28, 1947, Box 5 (recent acquisitions) of the Grove Collection, University of Manitoba.

<sup>2</sup>F. P. Grove, letter to Carleton Stanley dated December 11, 1945, Box 5 (recent acquisitions) of the Grove Collection, University of Manitoba.

Branden of A Search for America is Grove or a fictitious character does not matter; what does matter is that Grove chose to start his new life in western Canada. And he made that choice either consciously or unconsciously in order to fulfill his destiny, that of bringing his immense characters carved from primeval granite together with the only environment grand and primeval enough to provide those characters with a stage. For in his search for the primeval he had occasionally glimpsed it in the steppes of Russia and in the desert and on the sea, but with civilization encroaching on the primeval areas only mountains, seas, deserts and prairies remain as they were when they first emerged from chaos.

Grove has explained why he chose to remain in Canada in an unpublished lecture:

When I was a young man, an occasion had offered itself for me to cross Siberia; and I had done so; and it was that fact which had implanted in me the desire to see Canada, especially the west of Canada; for I had a suspicion that Canada was in many respects very similar to Siberia; it is.

.....  
I remained in Canada because there was in me one urge more powerful than any other; the urge to express certain things; in other words to write. And what I wanted to write about, had offered itself in this country.

.....

I have already hinted that for years before coming to Canada I had been a wanderer in out-of-the-way places...I had crossed Siberia....I had spent some time on the oasis of the Sahara;...I had sailed the seven seas in windjammers....

And in all these various climes and surroundings there had remained intact one certainty: this, that it was my fate, that it was a demand impressed upon me, one day perhaps in extreme old age, to body

forth in a work of art, of literature, what I thought of it all, a work which, to put it in one brief phrase, would stand forever.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to Siberia by Grove is important because on that trip to Siberia which he describes in some detail in In Search of Myself a revelation came to him to which Desmond Pacey refers in Frederick Philip Grove:

One evening their party met a wandering band of Kirghiz herdsmen. When these men had passed and were about a quarter of a mile distant they suddenly burst into song.<sup>4</sup>

Pacey then included much of the original description by Grove, some of which I include here:

It was a vast melancholy utterance, cadenced within a few octaves of the bass register as if the landscape as such had assumed a voice: full of an almost inarticulate realization of man's forlorn position in the face of a hostile barrenness of nature; and yet full, also, of a stubborn if perhaps only inchoate assertion of man's dignity below his gods.

A revelation came to me. All these humans...represented mere wavelets on the stream of a seminal, germinal life which flowed through them. . . .

No doubt each single one of them felt himself to be an individual; to me lack of personal distinguishing contact made them appear as mere representatives of their race.

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<sup>3</sup>F. P. Grove, Unpublished lecture, Box 22, of the Grove Collection, University of Manitoba.

<sup>4</sup>Desmond Pacey, Frederick Philip Grove, The Ryerson Press, 1945, p. 4.

But their song was eternal because, out of the stream and succession of the generations, somewhere, somewhen, a nameless individual had arisen to give them a voice. That voice was the important thing to me; for already I felt that one day I too was to be a voice; and I too was perfectly willing to remain nameless.<sup>5</sup>

That Grove chose Canada in which to be that voice and as he chose to be that voice for Canadians will bring new significance to the Canadian literary scene when more critics recognize him for what he is:

the typical, perhaps even the archetypal, Canadian....He was not just a writer who happened to be writing in Canada. He was a Canadian writer wholly absorbed by the Canadian scene and by the pioneer drama of a diverse yet single people; wholly convinced that this scene, this people could yield to the artist's vision themes and values at once unique and universal.

To follow Grove's realization of his vision as it is created for us in his prairie writings is breathtaking if one once captures the rhythm of his imagination and creativity. To those who accuse followers of Grove of reading into him things which are not there, there remain to be read Grove's own literary criticism, both published and unpublished, all of which clearly points to what he has attempted in his own writing. If ever an artist lived his life in the

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<sup>5</sup>F. P. Grove, In Search of Myself, Macmillan, 1946, pp. 153, 154.

<sup>6</sup>Malcolm Ross, Introduction to Over Prairie Trails, McClelland and Stewart, 1957, p. V.



shadow of a magnificent vision that artist was Grove.

## CHAPTER I

### THE MIND OF FREDERICK PHILIP GROVE

When he arrived in Haskett, Manitoba in 1912 the mind of Frederick Philip Grove had been fully prepared for his destiny as a writer. Whether that preparation had taken place during a formalized schooling or whether it resulted from private reading and study may never be known, unless the two mysterious sealed boxes of information at the University of Manitoba contain some information about this part of his life. How he arrived at that moment is of little consequence, but he did arrive and with a mind potentially productive of great writing that Canada has yet to fully appreciate. I intend to become involved with three aspects of that mind. First, Grove had a clear and full knowledge of literature, embracing the literature of classical Greece and Rome, the literature of Europe, and the literature of America. Second, he had clearly defined concepts of literary philosophy which would give to his writing more purpose and form than any other writer of his time in Canada. Third, he had a view of life which when traced through his writings emerges as a fully developed philosophy of life, and that view of life was tragic.

I will first discuss the effect of Grove's knowledge of literature. That he had this knowledge is undeniable; even a super-

ficial reading of his published and unpublished work is proof of this fact. In his autobiography In Search of Myself he draws attention to his reading habits at the age of fourteen:

I must say a word about my reading here. From the time when I had mastered the mechanics of the art, I had been an omnivorous reader and she ( his mother ) had taken me in hand herself and directed my selection of books. By the time I was fourteen I had a not inconsiderable library of my own; and it consisted very largely of complete sets. On every birthday I received, as a matter of course, at least one such set. The list was led by Scott; and Scott was followed by Byron. Then came Shakespeare-the latter, strange to say, at first in the German translation by Schlegel and Tieck, perhaps because we happened to be at Munich, but before the year was out I had an English Shakespeare as well. Schiller, Goethe, Manzoni, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Browning, Eliot, Macaulay, Carlyle followed; and with my pocket money I acquired classical authors in both Latin and Greek. ... Add to that, as I grew up, such divers fare as Montaigne, Pascal, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Hoelderlin, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Verga, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Calderon, Lesage, Corneille, Racine, Moliere, and countless others of lighter weight- Stevenson for instance... Mark Twain, Jules Verne- and you have a small idea of the extent of my reading. By acquiring standard histories of literature- a department in which Germany excelled - I managed somehow<sup>1</sup> even to organize my knowledge to a certain extent.<sup>1</sup>

To those who find it difficult to believe that someone could acquire such a broad knowledge of literature without having access to formal education I hold up the example of another great writer, Virginia Woolf, who in accepting an honorary degree from Oxford University

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<sup>1</sup>F. P. Grove, In Search of Myself, Macmillan, 1946, pp. 91, 92.

pointed out that she had not attended school for even one day in her life. Having been the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen and the granddaughter of Thackeray she learned more from the family libraries and conversations than she would have in decades of formal education.

Grove's knowledge of literature immediately introduces a problem: the problem of analyzing his work to estimate the influence of the various writers and schools of writers to which he had been exposed. Perhaps a more valuable and less dangerous occupation would be an analysis of some of his work with a view to identifying in his writing those archetypal symbols which, like umbilical cords, make his work an organic part of the whole of literature. Northrop Frye in The Anatomy of Criticism in his second essay "Theory of Symbols" makes the following explanation of the archetypal symbol:

The symbol in this phase is the communicable unit, to which I give the name archetype: that is, a typical or recurring image. I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience. And as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as social fact and as a mode of communication....

The repetition of certain common images of physical nature like the sea or the forest in a large number of poems cannot in itself be called even "coincidence" which is the name we give to a piece of design when we cannot find a use for it. But it does indicate a certain unity in the nature that poetry imitates, and in the communicating activity of which poetry forms part. Because of the

larger communicative context of education, it is possible for a story about the sea to be archetypal, to make a profound imaginative impact, on a reader who has never been out of Saskatchewan.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than using one of Frye's examples of archetypal symbolism I would prefer to look at an example which I think clearly illustrates the theory. It is Gertrude Stein's famous and misunderstood poem:

Rose is a rose is a rose.

In these seven words she spoke volumes because she intended in this repetition of an archetypal symbol to create a vision of truth or beauty in the mind of the reader which would conjure up all that the rose had ever symbolized in literature.

Gertrude Stein in this poem is attempting to express all that is meant in Chaucer's translation of The Romance of the Rose when the rose to the medieval mind symbolized the whole of beauty and love, when the mere reflection of the rose in the mirror-like pool was enough to send the medieval literary figure into ecstasy.

She also was attempting to express the symbolism of the Bible in the line:

The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> The Bible, Isaiah, 35, i.

and Shakespeare's themes:

What's in a name! That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.<sup>4</sup>

or Gautier's:

I am the spectre of the rose  
You wore but last night at the ball<sup>5</sup>

or Brownings:

Any nose  
May ravage with impunity a rose....<sup>6</sup>

or Christina Rossetti's:

Hope is like a harebell trembling from its birth  
Love is like a rose the joy of all the earth  
Faith is like a lily lifted high and white  
Love is like a lovely rose the world's delight  
Harebells and sweet lilies show a throneless growth,  
But the rose with all its thorns excels them both.<sup>7</sup>

In her famous one-line poem Gertrude Stein is giving us one of her experiences of one of those flashes of insight which we have on occasion when we suddenly see not only superficially but horizontally and vertically the whole significance and meaning of an aspect of truth or beauty. In this flash of insight the educated share with Stein the whole tremendous influence and meaning of the rose symbolism not only in literature but also in life itself from the time of creation until now.

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<sup>4</sup>W. Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, II, ii.

<sup>5</sup>T. Gautier, "The Spectre of the Rose", Stanza 1.

<sup>6</sup>R. Browning, "Sordello", bk. VI.

<sup>7</sup>C. G. Rossetti, "Hope is Like a Harebell".

In many ways Frederick Philip Grove's arrival in Haskett is like that of the legendary hero who came out of mystery in search of magnificent challenges before disappearing back into the mystery from which he had emerged. In many ways Grove's arrival in Haskett is like that of his heroes: Abe Spalding, Niels Lindstedt, John Elliott, Phil Branden all of whom came in search of a new life and in search of a dream. Grove came to Haskett in search of the primeval as the archetypal symbol of his whole view of life and creation. Having found it he stayed there until that view of life became unbearable for him with the death of his daughter May. Grove came to Haskett with knowledge of the world's literature, and the symbolism of that literature was to express itself once again here on the primeval prairie of the Canadian West.

When we come to a consideration of the second aspect of Grove's mind, his philosophy of literary purpose and form, we find that in his book of essays, It Needs to be Said, Grove has in the essay, "Realism in Literature," summed up his philosophy on this subject. Before setting out his definition of realism he first rejects what he considers to be a wrong view of realism:

There is a common acceptation of the word realism-in literature- against which I must define my attitude...In this vulgar and to my mind erroneous sense of the word, realism means frankness in the matters of sex.

.....

I advocate frankness in matters of sex: clean searching unimpassioned and unprejudiced discussions of their bearings and their importance.

Sex is real; as real as mountain tops and barren sea; as forests in a storm or fields in the first tender green of spring. Whatever exists is the legitimate subject matter of the literary artist, be he romantic or realist.<sup>8</sup>

Grove then makes his strongest point in this essay: the fact that realism in this mistaken sense relates to the choice of subject and that, for him, realism relates to literary procedure and not to the choice of subject.

He then turns his attention to the Naturalist School of writing as illustrated by the writings of Emile Zola. Grove says of Zola that he was a scientist.

To him the novel was not an art-form which enabled him to cast on his canvas a picture of life as he saw it; it was a "scientific experiment" in which he produced artificially facts and sequences of facts from which he claimed he could deduce laws of nature with as much certainty and necessity as a chemist deduces laws from the behaviour of liquids observed in vitro. The moment we examine these scientific pretensions of Zola's somewhat more closely, they appear singularly weak, confused, and altogether lacking in the permanent power of art.<sup>9</sup>

Grove concludes his attack on Zola's "pseudo-realism" by stating that if he is still read in Europe he is read for the poetic power with which he projected false conceptions into visions rather than for the accuracy of the picture of life presented

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<sup>8</sup>F. P. Grove, It Needs to be Said, Macmillan, 1929, pp.51-53.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 55, 56.