ENVIRONMENT AND THE QUEST MOTIF IN
SELECTED WORKS OF CANADIAN PRAIRIE FICTION

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 1966

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department
of
ENGLISH

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
April, 1970
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Date April 13, 1970
ABSTRACT

Time and place are the media through which the eternal is manifested for the comprehension of fallible man. It is the response to environment which has determined and shaped the human attitude toward ultimate mysteries. The patterns of nature are translated by the artist and philosopher into the ritual behaviour of man. The challenge of adversity and the joy of the morning or the new season are motivation for the restless desire to overcome the imperfections of human and geographical landscape.

The Canadian prairie, virgin and elemental, as old as the world and as new as the twentieth century, determines a particular kind of response which is both immediate and universal. It provides the traditional challenge of the desert with the inherent possibility of a Promised Land for the regenerate. The writers who have translated the prairie experience into words have tended to fuse traditional with personal mythology, elevating the moment in mutable time to time eternal. The prairie, for them, is at once the desert of the Old Testament and the modern wasteland. The response, although archetypal, has relevance for the individual.

The quest motif, which is an aspect of the romantic tradition of all cultures, is central to prairie fiction. The optimism of the journey toward the light is felt even in moments of darkness, during drought or a dust storm. There is a prevailing sense, in the Canadian prairie novel, that man, through
regenerate behaviour, will overcome. As he wanders through the physical and metaphysical landscape of the prairie, the individual learns to know God and to know himself.

As environment takes on traditional aspects of Godhead, the fictional characters find their analogues in the Bible and in traditional mythological figures. The sick king, the fisherman, the god, the messiah and the prairie farmer become fused in the symbolic struggle for identity. The names of the original pioneers in the Old Testament are given new vitality by the particularly contemporary dilemmas of their modern namesakes.

In the major fiction of the Canadian prairie, the quest takes on many aspects. Sometimes it is a direct search for transcendental reality, as in *Who Has Seen the Wind* by W.O. Mitchell, and sometimes it is an effort to find heaven on earth, outside of the spiritual context, as in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. Mitchell's journey after the meaning of God in *Who Has Seen the Wind* is primarily simplistic. He believes in the direct route. Reality is a means and not an impediment to supernatural revelation. For Sinclair Ross, whose characters in *As For Me and My House* are obsessed with transcendental reality, the quest is not so simple. Psychological realities distort divine ecstasy into grotesques. The Promised Land is circumscribed with irony.

Margaret Laurence, who has rejected the vertical quest after God, is concerned with the voyage toward self knowledge. Her paths lead into the self. The individual is responsible for his own salvation. A tragic example of irresponsibility
related to the horizontal quest motif is that of Abraham in Adele Wiseman's novel *The Sacrifice*.

The questor is not always successful, but the knowledge he gains contains the promise of salvation. That promise is often realized in the messianic motif which is a corollary of the quest. Outsiders with the power to heal, like Gwendolyn MacEwen's magician and George Elliott's *kissing man*, have the traditional properties of the saviour. Their love embodies the promise of spring and the new season.

The major and minor fiction of the prairie share a common vocabulary of optimism which is inherent in the quest literature of every tradition. Landscape is the objective correlative through which man learns by association about God and about himself. His struggle to comprehend particular environmental mysteries is analogous to the universal quest after truth.

Supervisor
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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian prairie, in spite of its superficial similarity to the metaphorical wasteland, is the fertile soil which has nourished some of the finest fiction written to date in this country. The vast rolling land stretching from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to the western border of Ontario is timeless, offering a rich symbolic medium to the artist, who responds both to the immediacy and the universality of its challenge. The prairie offers simultaneously many layers of history and reality. It is at once the desert of Genesis and the wasteland of the twentieth century nightmare, the regenerative promise of the ascendent cycle and the grim reminder of the inevitable decadence of past, present and future; it is anywhere and everywhere, a place where man can use his physical and moral strength to overcome a harsh environment which oppresses the body and the abstract hazards which engage the spirit in a struggle which is common to every man. The prairie is special in that the rhythm of its life has the capacity to engage the physical and metaphysical energies of its inhabitants. The rhythm of prairie reality can be felt and translated into symbolic terms.

The quest for perfection which drove the Canadian pioneer to undertake the romantic journey to a new land motivates a continuing awareness of the need to persevere, sometimes in the face of overwhelming adversity, in the struggle to overcome the imperfections of man and landscape. Because of the sense of isolation, mental or physical,
inherent in the prairie, which itself commands so much of man's energy just in the struggle to stay alive, the response to its challenge is peculiarly protestant, in the sense that is individual rather than collective. Each man, through his own regenerate behaviour, must earn the prerogative of mental and physical liberty. He is upheld by his own right reason, for the tight social network of a large urban integrated society is denied to him. For this reason, and others, some especially brilliant literary characters populate the prairie landscape. It takes a special almost superhuman effort to cry out and be heard in the wilderness, to be seen as a spot of colour amid the overwhelming greyness of a particularly bitter environment.

Empty land. Empty sky. A stranger to the prairies feels uneasily that he is driving straight into infinity.

The land is without character. It excites neither hatred nor love. There is nothing here to respond to. Not the austere sinister loneliness of a true desert nor the friendly security of a conventional pastoral landscape... Many prosperous farm homes are visible from the highway, crouched secure behind squat caragana hedges and towering evergreen windbreaks. But the deserted farmsteads make the greater impact, they offend the eye and depress the soul. The weather-blackened, two-storey houses with vacant, eye-like windows are reminiscent to a reader of Edgar Allen Poe of the gloom-ridden House of Usher. And, one suspects, many a farm wife of a past generation must have felt a great sense of kinship with the tragic Lady Madeline: the kinship of being buried alive.1

Even in failure, these people are a sharp though grim reminder of the ambivalence of the human struggle. We are all bound to die, despite the brief technicolour glory of a minor victory, and the landscape,

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1Edward McCourt, The Road Across Canada, p. 136. McCourt's description, although it records the bleakness of the prairie landscape does not take into account the positive response of its settlers, the potential which has inspired settler and fiction writer alike.
which is seen as an extension of the metaphysical world, will ultimately
triumph.

Left alone with the elements that alternately blessed and
cursed his ancestors, the inhabitant of the Canadian prairie often
responds in accordance with the traditions of the old world he has
supposedly left behind. Either the environment dictates its own immutable
archetypal patterns or the man superimposes his own knowledge of the
past on the present to facilitate some kind of mental order. It is
important to understand what we perceive and understanding is often
limited to what we know. Whatever the reasons, the past is the conven-
tional medium for interpreting the present. Whether or not
this is the appropriate route to truth is irrelevant. Whoever is
responsible for the conditioned response, man or God (nature), it
still happens. The prairie writer, even when he is cynical about faith and
social traditions, as is Margaret Laurence, is chained to the observance
of the present through the mask of past. Even in the new land, we are
bound to the language and symbols of our heritage. This is the problem
faced by the characters in most of the novels studied and by the
artists themselves. Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel* is tortured by
her desire to exist within and outside of time; Abraham in Adele
Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* is pathetically locked in a notion of himself
that is entirely determined by a distorted view of history. The promise
of the future and the new land is constantly underscored by the failures
of the past. Hope and despair are juxtaposed in the seasonal cycles
of the prairie itself and in the association with the symbolic vocabulary
it evokes.

Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, articulates the
development of the quest motif from the vegetative cycle in which man
is involuntarily involved. The traditions she describes, which persist in all religions and all literatures, are learned from generation to generation through cultural inheritance and through communion with the earth.

The frail story is not du fond en comble the product of imagination, literary or popular. At its root lies the record, more or less distorted, of an ancient ritual, having for its ultimate object the initiation into the secret of the sources of life, physical and spiritual.²

The notions of the Wasted Land and the Fisher King (messiah) which Weston and Sir James Frazer contend are inherent in all religions are fundamental to the symbolic vocabulary of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, who applied the traditional response to the spiritual vacuum of the twentieth century desert. Although Eliot borrows the rural imagery of Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes, his wasteland is primarily urban, his response primarily intellectual. The writers of the Canadian prairie, who learned from the devastating experience of a horrible depression in the thirties that the Old King must be dying if not dead, relied not on vicarious experience but on direct experience with landscape for artistic motivation.

* * *

Religion has its anthropological origins in the ritual of nature and nature has decreed that the response to the unfettered prairie be particularly religious. The human life cycle, so important in the structure of the prairie novel, corresponds to the life and death of the earth. Jessie Weston, in correlating the data compiled by Sir James Frazer and examining its function in literary motifs,

²Jessie Weston, From Ritual to Romance, p. 203.
explains the development of natural patterns into ritual.

The ultimate, and what we may in general sense term the classical, form in which this sense of the community of the Life principle found expression was that which endowed like vivifying force of Nature with a distinct personality divine, or semi-divine, whose experiences, in virtue of his close kindship with humanity, might be expressed in terms of ordinary life.

At this stage the progress of the seasons, the birth of vegetation in spring, or its revival after the autumn rains, its glorious fruition in early summer, its decline and death under the malificent influence either of the scorching sun, or the bitter winter cold, symbolically represented the corresponding stages in the life of this anthropomorphically conceived Being, whose annual progress from birth to death, from death to a renewed life, was celebrated with a solemn ritual of corresponding alternations of rejoicing and lamentation.³

The conventional archetypes of prairie literature belong to the liturgy of men of every denomination. Catholic, Protestant and Jew regress historically to the common tradition of the Old Testament. The Canadian prairie has become, metaphorically, the biblical desert. This pattern would be tedious and contrived, indeed it sometimes is, if it were not for the fundamental honesty of these associations. The environment seems to demand that the artist approach the abstract through the realities of past and present. When history adds another dimension to present realities, as in The Stone Angel, the phenomenon is justified, but when it is contrived in its domination of the reader's response to characterization and plot, as in The Sacrifice, where a balance is only occasionally achieved, then it is not. Lawrence's Hagar is unique, free of the biblical Hagar, except by association. Her immediate reality is enhanced rather than encumbered by the analogy.

³Ibid., p. 35.
Over and over again, the personal situations of individuals confronting the challenge of life on the prairie are expressed in explicit biblical terms. The names of the characters reflect the universality of their dilemma. In the analogous behaviour of the Judiths, Hagars, Abrahams, Jacobs and Sarahs is contained the duality of existence. At once, by association, the optimism of renewal is juxtaposed by the irony of time past. The old Judith is dead, long live the new Judith. The Idea of Judith persists. The permanent possibility is always there. Just as the flowers of the new season are triumphant over the dried remainders of the year past, the new generation is enough cause for celebration.

The language of the Old Testament is also repeated consciously and unconsciously in the novels studied. In times of stress, the quest for meaning often results in the comfortable and reassuring rhythms of ritual utterance. Apart from the conscious need for the familiar framework of liturgy, the land itself demands and controls an almost dogmatic linguistic response. The order of nature is reflected in the organization of words. A new Genesis is being written in the cadences of the old. The mystery of the prairie is translated into the terms which express the mysteries of the universe.

One of the literary benefits of the relative isolation of the prairie writer is his freedom from the shallow imitation of contemporary precedents, set by innovators in other environments, which has plagued Canadian writers of the more urban east and west. The
frontier mentality, which permeates American prairie fiction, has had negligible effect on the developing literature of the Canadian midwest. Similarly, prairie fiction has remained relatively unaffected by the sophistications of San Francisco, New York, London and Paris. Out of the mainstream, the prairie writer is freer as an individual; he does not succumb to the temptation to write of the prairie wilderness in terms of Joyce's Dublin; however he misses the impetus for originality which is provided by the literary clique and the example of the finest writers of the generation who have found a contemporary mode of expression for contemporary problems. Consistently, the prairie writer has turned to the older model which is rooted deep in his heritage. The romantic pattern of Genesis and the quest for the Promised Land is thematically repeated over and over again. It is the degree of success with which the immediate is related to the absolute and the believability of the analogy on which much prairie fiction will stand or fall.

There are as many aspects of the quest as there are facets to a diamond. To extend the metaphor, the overall brilliance of the whole depends on the colour and brilliance of each facet. The medium is a shared language of conventional archetypes but the message must be unique to ensure its validity. It is the quality of the journey, in Lawrencean terms, on which the outcome depends. Each of the novels discussed is the record of a particular journey of the soul. Some are more successful than others in human and artistic terms, but they are

\[4\] H.C. Allen in Bush and Backwoods, a comparison of the American and Australian frontiers, describes the great American push to the west over an arid and unfriendly prairie, plagued by drought and hostile Indians. Canadians seem to have viewed the prairie itself more optimistically and the settler had on his side a tradition of law and order, which is foreign to the American frontier mentality.
bound by common objectives and the shared symbolism of a universal quest against a common environmental background.

* * *

W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* is the most explicitly metaphysical of the novels studied. The obvious development of religious motifs analogous to a young boy's quest after the meaning of the wind, as the manifestation of God, makes the novel an obvious place to start in the explication of the relationship between environment and the romance theme. The author articulates the significance of this symbiosis in his epigraph. The Prefatory remarks read:

Many interpreters of the Bible believe the wind to be symbolic of Godhead. In this story I have tried to present sympathetically the struggle of a boy to understand what still defeats mature and learned men -- the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life. To him are revealed in moments of fleeting vision the realities of birth, hunger, satiety, eternity, death. They are moments when an inquiring heart seeks finality, and the chain of darkness is broken. This is the story of a boy and the wind.

Here the life cycles of man and the landscape are thematically linked and the structural and moral patterns of the novel are established.

*Who Has Seen the Wind* is a tightly structured novel in which the epiphanies which comprise the revelations of a young boy on the prairie are developed by analogy through the life cycle. The circle, which on one hand symbolically unites man to God and on the other represents the regenerative and degenerative phases of natural existence, is at once the dominant symbol and the shape of experience. The self-conscious control of reality through religious imagery is mitigated by the disarming humanity of the young boy as he encounters the truths and fictions of life on his journey toward knowledge and spiritual and physical adulthood.
The novel's artistic success depends upon the validity of the analogy drawn between animate and inanimate realities, time mutable and eternal. The rhythms of the boy's life are determined by the seasonal rhythms of nature. On the prairie, the heartbeats of natural religion can be felt and interpreted symbolically. The discord between man and his environment, which is the result of civilization and the effort to dominate and overcome the forces of nature, can be at least temporarily forgotten on the prairie. Brian's quest ultimately leads him there, away from the town, where he can search for meaning without being influenced by the distorting social mores which cause a breach in the great circle of complete understanding, which Abraham described in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*.

The polarities of town and country which are manifested literally and metaphorically in prairie fiction are inherent in Mitchell's treatment of material and spiritual realities. The town is corrupt, Eden after the fall, a place of false values and false religion, and the country, where the truths of life and death persevere, becomes a kind of Promised Land, where the regenerate can find the state of grace through contact with nature. Laurence's Hagar Shipley, Mitchell's Brian, and Ross's Mrs. Bentley are all suspicious of the town. Their curiosity draws them back to the unspoiled earth.

This eighteenth century view may appear to be superficially escapist and yet, inherent in the withdrawal from society which is necessary for the penetration of the unknown, is the promise of renewal for the town and the peers of the questor who returns to share his knowledge.  

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5The "back to nature" movement of the romantics is evidence of the escape into landscape which, hopefully, will revive uncorrupted values in the soul of a man who has been conditioned by artificial social values. It is not "escape" but "renewal" that the romantic questor is seeking.
This optimistic view persists in spite of the physical adversity of landscape and the moral degeneration represented in towns.

The concern with generation, which is an aspect of the seasonal considerations which shape the life and attitudes of the prairie inhabitant, is indigenous to the land and to the man who lives there. The elaborate genealogy of Genesis is reflected in the Canadian prairie novel, where the questor's chief weapon against time is his ability to procreate. Past and present are united through the abstraction of shared mythology and the family relationships which are even more important to rural people than to their urban counterparts. These relationships can be educational, as in Brian O'Connal's experiences with his grandmother and parents, or destructive, as in the twisted identity dilemmas of the family of Abraham in Adele Wiseman's The Sacrifice.

Although there is much of the book of Genesis in Who Has Seen the Wind, the novel is thematically closer to the guarded cynicism of Ecclesiastes and the prophecy of Ezekiel. Much history has passed before Ecclesiastes and the untried faith of the early chapters has been replaced by skepticism. Mitchell's concern with the problems of the twentieth century wasteland are united with the universal themes through his employment of the imagery of Ecclesiastes most popular with writers of the "lost generation" of Gertrude Stein, particularly Eliot, Pound and Hemingway. It is important to remember that the optimism inherent in the relationship of the quest to biblical themes is often controlled in prairie fiction by the signposts of memory. No one who has endured wars, transplantation and a prairie depression can believe that all is for the best in the best of
all possible worlds. However, that is not to say that the possibility does not exist.

Brian O'Connal's quest is primarily vertical, in that he endeavours to transcend the prairie landscape and experience the realities of the metaphysical world. His experience, although rooted in the soil, moves toward the sun as centre of the universe. Because of the symbolic nature of his journey, he never becomes truly three-dimensional. It is in Sinclair Ross' novel *As For Me and My House* that psychological realities are most effectively pitted against elusive metaphysical absolutes.

In the novel whose title is taken from the promise of Joshua ("As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord") on the journey to the Promised Land, the psychological grotesques of unbearable realities compete daily with a stubborn faith in the existence of absolutes. The environment becomes for the Bentleys the fierce God of the Old Testament who punishes for any deviation from the puritanical quest for salvation. Only through suffering are they able to expiate the guilt felt for thwarted desires, sexual, moral and religious hypocrisy. Joshua's promise is both honestly felt and hypocritically adhered to as they falter in the trial and contains the essence of the ambivalence of the novel.

The juxtaposition of hope and despair in *As for Me and My House* is effectively personified in the persistently intrusive landscape. The wind, which is both giver and destroyer for Brian O'Connal, invades like the icy tentacles of an octopus the corners of the shabby house and minds of the Bentleys, whose effort to keep the faith is painful and continuous. Wind and dust are the only relief from the vestiges of optimism inherent in the progression of generations and the persistent
adherence to the doctrine of salvation through sacrifice, a notion which is focused in the symbolic offering of Judith and the psychological self-flagellation and false martyrdom of both Mr. and Mrs. Bentley.

The impulse to believe and overcome, which is honestly felt by both partners in the hellish marriage, is constantly checked by the grim reminders of prairie depression. God will not provide for man; man is responsible for his own physical and spiritual sustenance. If he fails, he will suffer. If he succeeds, he may possibly transcend suffering and experience the sublime. The Bentley's quest is vertical, but the opportunity for salvation is a small chink of light in the overwhelmingly oppressive environmental greyness.

*As For Me and My House* is a mannerist work of surrealistic tensions and the dog El Greco serves as a reminder of the agony of the Renaissance painter. Like El Greco's figures, the Bentleys are stretched out on the rack. Belief is constantly associated with pain.

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6The broken circle, poignant expression of the breakdown of communication between man and God is one of the more important stylistic features in Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*, and Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* as it is in Milton's "Lycidas" and Shakespeare's *King Lear* and a typical mannerist gestalt. In *As For Me and My House*, mannerist contraposto is manifested in the agonizing polarities of Christian idealism and grim psychological reality. The efficacious technical surface of the mannerist style, which serves to control the subjectivity of conflict, is reflected in Ross's careful control of language in the novel. In his excellent section, in *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*, developing the thematic analogies between mannerist painting, architecture and literature, Wylie Sypher describes the conditions which motivated this particular response, "It seems to be a response to the temper of Europe between 1520 and 1620, one of tormenting doubt and rigorous obedience to ardently felt but incoherent dogmatic principles. Mannerism is full of contradictions: rigid formality and obvious 'disturbance', bareness and overelegance, mysticism and pornography, El Greco and Parmigianino." (p. 127).
Superficially, the novel moves through the seasons of winter and hell into spring and the promise of renewal contained in the birth of Judith's baby. Ross' use of the cyclic pattern of Mitchell is more subtle and horribly ironic. Death is satanically represented in new life. Regeneration is never automatic and can only be earned.

There is more of the desert in the Promised Land of Ross' prairie. However, the magnetic attraction which draws the finer instincts of Horizon's inhabitants away from the town to the country is the same immutable force that persists in prairie literature. Faith in the land itself, in spite of the cruel alternation of drought and flood, exceeds faith in human nature. It is only through a harmonious relationship with the earth that the ideal can be experienced. The Bentleys err in their assumption that renunciation of the flesh is the only route to the spirit. When they waver, the guilt resulting from carnal sin not only prevents their knowledge of the ideal, but also the possibility of approaching a condition of grace through the real. Like Margaret Laurence's Hagar, the Bentley's misinterpretation of puritanical values eliminates the possibility of a heaven on earth.

Even their religion becomes an aspect of sin for the Bentleys. Their idealism will not allow them to accept the legitimate phenomenon of doubt, and, when they find their faith wavering, they are unable to progress to the alternate possibility. They attempt to respond dogmatically to a pragmatic landscape and their tragedy is really a failure to learn the lessons of nature and adapt. The decision to escape across the prairie to another situation, which will probably become just another point on the locus of despair, instead of facing the real issues which will follow them wherever they go, is the
ultimate failure. Like Hagar Shipley, the Bentleys must learn that the real wilderness is personal and cannot be escaped.

While Sinclair Ross has effectively recorded the effect of environment on character, particularly in *As for Me and My House* and his poignant short story "The Painted Door", Margaret Laurence is more concerned with the point of view which affects perception of landscape. In her two "prairie" novels, *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*, the world is seen through the medium of the concave and convex personalities of Rachel Cameron and Hagar Shipley. That is not to say the environment lacks a reality of its own; Mrs. Laurence's description is particularly vivid, but is distorted in the self-centred mirror vision of the major characters.

This point of view has aesthetic and moral implications, for Margaret Laurence's is a man-centred universe. She is cynical about the divine possibilities of the natural or supernatural worlds. She is not concerned with the system of absolutes which inspire the romanticism of other prairie writers but with the purely human possibility of personal fulfillment. Her mysteries exist within not without the mind and her characters are generally cynical about notions of a great designer. Natural description in the novels is real and full of awe, but there is nothing of the feeling of divinity behind the various aspects of landscape.

Despite the overwhelming concern with mutable life, which leads Hagar and Rachel to reject the optimistic attitude toward death particularly manifested by W. O. Mitchell in *Who Has Seen the
Wind, Margaret Laurence's characters are trapped by the puritanical frame of reference which seems indigenous to the prairie. Although Hagar and Rachel reject organized religion early in their lives and repudiate the town, which is the focus of their flagellation and suffering, by escaping to the coast, they consciously or unconsciously attempt to live within the puritan ethic. Hard work and self sacrifice, even though it is egotistically motivated, are inherent in their life styles.

Still, human relationships have ascendency over the compulsion for communion with God which alternately inspires and frustrates some of the other characters in prairie fiction. Biblical and sacramental patterns in both novels function ironically in that they are relied upon as the framework for self realization despite the individual's effort to break free from the ritual demands of society and the inevitable progression of the life cycle. Although Laurence's Hagar, Wiseman's Abraham and Mitchell's Brian O'Connal are obsessed by separate goals, they are irrevocably bound by a common language of archetypes.

Hagar, described as an "Egyptian", is deliberately pre-Christian and her world is constantly described in the terms of the desert, a barren wilderness that is, in fact, an extension of her own inability to "rejoice" and communicate. She has no love for the land, as does her husband Bram Shipley whose dynastic urge is at once

7Although she does not deal with the writings of Margaret Laurence, Margaret Cameron in her M.A. thesis, "Puritanism in the Canadian Prairie Novel," describes the puritanical response to the prairie landscape and its significant function in the development of prairie fiction.
understandable and pathetic, for it is a mirror held up to the desolation of her own soul. Her greatest mistake rests in the assumption that the negative qualities of her character can be left behind in the environment onto which she has egotistically transposed them.

The journey motif, which so often is symbolically represented by the train which unites the prairie people with the outside world, is polarized in the opposites of escape and commitment in The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. Ultimately, the quest for self-realization, a solution to the problem of identity, must result in communion, but the complicated processes by which the conflicts are resolved often involve the false journey which is a retreat into the world of illusion which obscures the truth about themselves. For Rachel, in A Jest of God, the false journey is inherent in her decision to leave Manawaka and in her daydreams which eliminate the possibility of coming to grips with herself in terms of the real world. Analagous to Rachel's retreats are Hagar's aggressive forays into the illusory world of self-misconception. In order for both women to find their way out of the wilderness, they must journey in opposite directions. Hagar has to learn to examine her own weaknesses, to accept the disparity between her self image and reality, and Rachel must externalize the self which has hidden too long beneath a shell of pity and self doubt.

The quest takes many interesting directions. In order to know themselves, isolated beings in the vast unprotected land must reconcile notions real and ideal through human effort. In the novels of Margaret Laurence, that effort is expressed in human terms.
She does not hope to explain the natural in terms of the supernatural but must deal with empirical data as she perceives it. There is more to be learned from human than from divine revelation. It is a lesson the Bentleys might have learned:

The most profound failure to adapt to environment is that of Abraham in Adele Wiseman's novel *The Sacrifice*, written in 1956. Tragically, the Russian immigrant, bearing the weighty legacy of his name, is totally insensitive to the dialectic demands articulated by his own creed. He responds, according to his own emotional and intellectual construct, to the jungle of the city as though it were the biblical wilderness. The old man, dangerously balancing on the edge of a madness created by his obsession with historical time, fails dramatically in his dynastic ambitions. The code "to grow, to discover, to build" becomes a paradox as Abraham, the questor who ignores the demands of landscape, marks time, like the dreamer in his dream, never moving beyond the static condition of paralysis.

Abraham is the archetypal Wandering Jew and his dilemma is that of Jews everywhere, should he persevere in his insistence on responding traditionally to new situations or should he adapt to the contemporary landscape. Unfortunately for his victims, Miss Wiseman's blind and foolish Lear dogmatically fashions his quest after the symbolic mode of Jewish tradition, forgetting his responsibilities as a human being. Like Hagar Shipley, he refuses to communicate and becomes a grotesque, defeated by his own good intentions.

Miss Wiseman's is the most explicit use of biblical analogue to date in prairie fiction. The book revolves thematically and
aesthetically around the problem of reconciling symbol and reality, time historical and immediate. Just as Abraham fails as an individual, the novel occasionally fails to transcend the contrivances of an analogous plot. The ritual into which Abraham has fashioned his life is only credible when it completes the circle between man and God, as in the scene where Laiah is murdered in accordance with the rhythms of sexual and religious passion, even though Abraham fails himself to do that.

The city, out of touch with the elements except where the cold invades during the winters of discontent, complicates the fundamental harmony between the prairie environment and the romantic motifs originally inspired by a similar landscape. Unlike the Bentleys, Brian O'Connal, or Rachel Cameron, Abraham and his family are unable to escape the labyrinth of urban life and achieve the symbolic potential of their names in communion with the prairie.

The sacrificial theme, which permeates all literature of progress and is fundamental to the seasonal preoccupations of prairie writers, is the instrument of harmony and discord in Adele Wiseman's novel. Optimistically, renewal, or more specifically the possibility of perfection for Moses, the grandson, is inherent in Abraham's misguided sacrifice of his son and the false earth mother Laiah. On the other hand, the murders, one conscious and other unconscious, are immoral and degenerate, contrary to the laws of nature and society. Although Isaac's self sacrifice is voluntary, it is a conditioned response to the awesome demands of the father. At the point of ritual death, the polarities of hope and despair are inextricably wedded. Abraham's assumption of the role of sacrificial
priest is ultimately immoral because it is out of the context of his social environment. What is heroic in the biblical Abraham is pathetic in the old immigrant.

Another motif introduced in The Sacrifice, which is common to much quest literature, is divine intervention, real or imaginary, in the person of the messiah. The struggle to overcome his natural condition is so overwhelming at times he articulates the need for an agent of salvation, an intermediary who can interpret the will of God and elevate man to a higher position in the hierarchy of heaven and earth. In his madness, Abraham thrusts the messianic role on the sickly shoulders of his only remaining son. His expectations are tragic. Elsewhere in prairie literature, the Christ-like function is limited to the individual who has the capacity to make the message of love and compassion felt in the lives of the people. George Elliott's The Kissing Man is populated with such characters. The semi-divine questor is also central to the Australian writer Randolph Stow's novel Tourmaline, which is briefly discussed to illustrate a similar response to a landscape similar to the Canadian prairie.

The fundamental puritanism of Canadian prairie fiction is controlled by an environment that justifies the protestant notion of perfection through suffering. Life is brutal and death is painful, but the promise of renewal is inherent in every winter and every sacrifice.

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing.
Thou has put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness.
(Psalms XXX,II)

Prairie writers, combining an intellectual response to the modern wasteland, a physical and metaphysical response to the prairie, and an emotional response to the persistent memory of traditional
mythology, have, despite their isolation, reacted in a very similar way to the possibilities of a Promised Land, personal and social, in the Canadian mid-west. The quest motif is inherent in the processes of growing, discovering and building, ironically articulated by an unsuccessful traveller.
CHAPTER I

Who Has Seen the Wind

Christina Rossetti's poem, which provides the title for the novel *Who Has Seen the Wind*, also articulates its central problem; man's effort to comprehend the mysteries of a vast and uncompromising universe. The wind, Old Testament symbol of Godhead, becomes in the novel a metaphor for the ultimate mysteries which control the destiny of a young boy and the people and things around him. W.O. Mitchell has adapted the traditional quest motif to a boy's striving after the meaning of the wind. The boy learns early that he, like a kite, is caught up in its omnipotent force. The epic journey of Brian Sean MacMurray O'Connell is one toward self knowledge. His journey of the soul has its original impetus in reality. Brian's maturing process is analogous to the development of the novel, which grows from the particular to the absolute. Mitchell has presented the problems confronting man in microcosm, through a young boy on the prairie, but, as Brian struggles to relate his own personal mythology to the Ideas behind the life force, it appears that he is indeed at the centre of the universe. It is in the validity of the immediate experience that the novel and the boy approach truth.

Brian, like Stephen Dedalus, is a stone in the pool. As he breaks the smooth surface of the unknown, each revelation, which comes in the form of an epiphany, motivates a larger circle of awareness. The boy grows outward from each experience. Like
Stephen, Brian learns the painful process of transcending time and place in the effort to know and understand.

The circle, chief aesthetic and structural device in the novel, permeates the conscious and unconscious mind as the boy and the novel progress through a life cycle which, although its arc embraces a season in hell, is essentially positive. There is, in Brian and in Mitchell, an enthusiasm, which in Sinclair Ross's novel *As For Me and My House* is cruelly ambiguous. In *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the emotional and intellectual emphasis is on the ascendent phase.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
- a time to be born and a time to die;
- a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- a time to kill and a time to heal;
- a time to break down and a time to build up;
- a time to weep and a time to laugh;
- a time to mourn and a time to dance;

(*Ecclesiastes*, 3:1)

Mutable time and the wind, time immutable, are corresponding parts of the great circle. The rhythms of the book, which originate in reality, progress dialectically in accordance with the patterns of the universe:

The sun rises and the sun goes down,
And hastens to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south,
And goes round to the north;
Round and round goes the wind,
And on its' circuit the wind returns.

(*Ecclesiastes*, 1:5)

The skepticism of the twentieth century has led many literary artists to the biblical warnings of the books of *Ecclesiastes* and *Ezekiel*, which are the source of much of the wasteland imagery that permeates the poetry of Pound and Eliot and the novels of Hemingway,
particularly The Sun Also Rises. However, inherent in the wasteland condition, is the promise of regeneration. In the dry bones of the dead is the promise of new life. The spirit of God blows upon them "and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet" (Ezekiel 37:10) Mitchell avoids the artistic dangers inherent in the repetition of these motifs through his original treatment of reality. Through his honesty in recording the empirical data of characters and landscape and an obvious delight in human nature and natural environment, he breathes life into his characters and avoids the stereotype. Unlike Eliot, who envisioned the possibility of salvation through organized religion, which Brian soon learns is clouded by hypocrisy, bigotry and narrow provincialism, Mitchell concentrates on the protestant notion of individuality. The boy learns, through his own regenerate behaviour, the universal premises of a natural religion. By the end of the novel, he knows his quest will lead him not to the church but to the prairie, which, despite apparent similarity to the wasteland, becomes a kind of Promised Land.

From one season to another, from birth to death, the wind carries its message to the boy who is looking for God. It is an ambiguous wind, like the wind of the Old Testament -- sometimes benign, sometimes fierce and vengeful. The wind gives and the wind takes away. The vast unprotected prairie is particularly subject to the fickleness of the wind. It can bring death to the crops or rain to feed them. Patiently, the prairie waits "for the unfailing visitation of the wind, gentle at first, barely stroking the long grasses and given them life; later, a long hot gusting that would
lift the black topsoil and pile it in barrow pits along the roads, or in deep banks against the fences.”

Brian is sensitive to the changing moods of the wind. He associates it with fear and destruction and alternately with freedom and goodness.

He listened to a rising wind that night as he lay in bed with Bobbie. The brass weather stripping on the doors of the house vibrated mournfully through the darkness again and again. Brian lay wide-eyed, filled with awful guilt and - much more than that - with the fear of promised punishment.

He felt a gathering Presence in his room as the wind lifted high, and higher still, keening and keening again, to die away and be born once more while the sad hum of the weather stripping lingered on in the silence. Fearful-avenging-was the gathering wrath about to strike down Brian Sean MacMurray O'Connal, the terror stricken Brian O'Connal, who had lied about his hands. He dared not move. He dared not cry out. He dared not stay silent. Taking its rhythm from the wild wind, panic lifted within him, subsided, rose again and washed over him till he trembled unmercifully and sweat started out over his entire body.

Brian is himself a harp the wind plays upon. Mitchell imitates its effect on the boy through ritual language. At first Brian is almost involuntary in his response to the wind. His initial reaction, wonder, is replaced by comprehension as he moves beyond his limited conception of R.W. God, B.V.D., all bloody, to acceptance of his father's definition of the abstract.

On the paper he made blue with his crayon. And God was there. He made a yellow God, yellow for the round part, and green legs, and purple eyes and red arms, and that was God. He made another God and another, and another till there were Gods all over the paper. He added arms and more arms, legs and more legs; those were spider Gods, of course.

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9Ibid., p. 95.

His early attempts to define God in concrete terms are not unlike the effort of Paul, in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*, to arrive at a meaningful philosophy of life through semantics. However, for both Paul and Brian, the words and symbols of civilization are really the masks of reality which impede their quest for self knowledge.

Brian's Uncle Sean recognizes the wind as his adversary in his long and bitter struggle with the prairie. He is the secular priest who will grow "lilacs out of the dead land." Uncle Sean's struggle with the wind and the barren land is only superficially profane. His refusal to acquiesce is a magnificent assertion of man's effort to overcome personal fallibility. In this, he is essentially puritanical, although few of the townspeople are sensitive to the quality of divinity in his voice. He represents the potential fertility of the prairie, which is untouched by the corruption of the town. His is a priest-like function and Brian recognizes the ritual power of his blasphemy, and is hypnotized by the power of his splendid rhetoric.

The uncle's denunciations are fervidly evangelical. He will multiply his talent instead of burying it. He has the power to make a paradise in the desert.

In the course of the drought years Sean had changed from a bewildered man, watching dry winds lick up the topsoil from his land, to a man with a message. He was the keeper of the Lord's vineyard, literally.

And now as he often did, he launched into one of his evangelical denunciations.

'Awful! She's plum awful, Gerald! Stupid!' he cried. 'They never hearda- strip farming an' they don't wanta hear! 'Plant yer crops! I tell 'em, 'in strips across the prevailing winds- Fight the wind an' fight the driftin'"

11Ibid., p. 18.
The grandmother, whose death wish is closely associated with the wind, also perceives its spiritual function. She resents the window that cuts off her communion with God. Brian becomes her intermediary, lifting the sash and letting its mint freshness invade the staleness of the sickroom. The wind for the grandmother is life in death; it ameliorates the inertia of limbo as she waits for change. The boy is sensitive to the spiritual need, which transcends his mother's concern for the physical. He feeds on her wisdom as she nears the end of her life cycle. The mother, on the other hand, has every reason to fear death, which has threatened her youngest son and taken her husband.

The changes which occur in the boy's relationship with his grandmother significantly parallel his growth toward maturity. Originally, he perceives her only in the physical sense; her smell, her limp, and her belching. As he slowly puts together the pieces of reality to form a personal philosophy, he becomes aware of her as a real person with a body and a soul. "It seems too that as he got older his grandmother had come to meet him spiritually in her declining years; for all his gravity he was still a child." Boy and grandmother are both hovering on a threshold, he of life temporal and she of life eternal. Their expectancy is a medium for communication. When the old lady dies, there is a sense of relief. It is right. Unlike Brian's father, who is cut off at the prime, she has completed life's cycle. The grandmother, in death, becomes a part of the boy, a link between the past and the present, the real and the ideal.

\[12\text{Op. cit., p. 251.}\]
She is dust, but out of that dust will grow his manhood.

Saint Sammy is an interesting and ambiguous figure in Brian's landscape. His spirituality escapes sublimity and achieves only the grotesque. He is the exception to Mitchell's equation of the wind to regenerate characters. The old man is associated with the charnel smells of death. His quest for truth is a failure, for, in the pursuit of truth, he has only broken through to the reality of madness. There is no hope in madness, for, despite increased knowledge, there is no capacity for synthesis. Saint Sammy is a false Christ. His adherence to the language of the Bible is empty and meaningless. He is a corrupter of words, the fool who has lost sight of the philosopher. Unlike Uncle Sean, whose blasphemy is fertile, Saint Sammy specializes in sterile rhetoric. He is dry bones with no life.

Mistakenly, Saint Sammy explains a prairie storm as the force of his own vengeance. However, there is no power in a hatred that knows no love. He is a destructive force and it is folly in him to assume his power over the wind.

"Sammy, Sammy, this is her, and I say untuh you she is a dandy! Moreover I have tried her out! I have blew over Tourigny's henhouse; I have uprooted Dan Tate's wind break, tooken the back door off the schoolhouse, turned over the girls toilet, three racks, six grain wagons; I have blew down the power line in four places; I have wrecked the sails on Magnus Peterson's wind-mill."13

The boys enjoy the empty ritual of his witchcraft, counting his collection of underwear labels, but they finally recognize his impotence.

The character who comes closest to an abstraction in the novel, but who for some reason is credible as the actual and imaginary companion of the boy Brian is the young Ben. The wild prairie boy, who utters less than a half dozen lines in the novel, but whose impact is constantly being felt, somehow achieves credibility. He is always there, like a ubiquitous God, in times of stress. Those people in the town who are spiritually regenerate appreciate the beautiful quality of his wildness. He is an Adam in the garden, before the fall. They feel the strength of his primaeval force. The young Ben is most closely associated with the wind. Brian feels it right away. "The boy has - I wish I had prairie hair. He has the wind on him all the time - it gets in his hair."\(^{14}\)

According to the conventional wisdom of the corrupt townspeople, the young Ben is evil and deserving of punishment. His inscrutability frightens them. They do not want to comprehend his mysteries. He stalks the town as a reminder of the possibility that they may not have found all the answers. Ultimately, they cannot get at him, because he is above their justice and cannot be judged by the standards of the community. Their laws bear no resemblance to the laws of nature, which he lives by. According to his law of necessity, stealing a rifle when it is needed is less immoral than the brutal and wanton torture of a prairie gopher.

The townspeople want to visit the sins of the father on the son and expiate their own sense of guilt by using the young Ben as a scapegoat for their own aberrations. Mitchell's portrait of a town sentencing its bootlegger for distilling the whiskey they drink behind their shades becomes flaccid when the irony falls into melodrama.

These same townspeople refuse to recognize the son as an individual;
"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are
set on edge." (Ezekiel 18:2) Their chief frustration lies in the
boy's refusal to join. He and the prairie are beyond their limited
circle of awareness.

Brian is quick to recognize the propriety of the young Ben's
presence on the prairie. He is the potential of the unknown. So
far, the town has failed to pollute either the boy or the prairie.

Brian was not startled; he simply accepted the boy's
presence out here as he had accepted that of the gopher
and the hawk and the dragonfly.
"This is your prairie", Brian said.
The boy did not answer him. He turned and walked as
silently as he had come, out over the prairie. His walk
was smooth.
After the boy's figure had become just a speck in
the distance, Brian looked up into the sky, now filled
with a soft expanse of cloud, the higher edges luminous
and startling against the blue. It stretched to the
prairie's rim. As he stared, the gray underside carded
out, and through the cloud's softness was revealed a
blue well shot with sunlight. Almost as soon as it had
cleared, a whisking of cloud stole over it.
For one moment no wind stirred. A butterfly went
pelting past. God, Brian decided, must like the boy's
prairie.15

The characters of the town, in that there are perhaps too
many of them to develop fully, and that they are largely seen through
the prejudiced filters of a young boy's eyes, sometimes fall dangerously
close to stereotype. However, there is an aesthetic homogeneity
in their tendency to type and Mitchell's creation of what is and must
be seen as an essentially pasteboard town. The hypocrisy of many of
the townspeople is analogous to the false fronts of the stores on the
main street. They are all mask. It takes the prairie and the prairie

people; Sean, Ben, young Ben, and even Saint Sammy, to point out the disparity between the illusion and reality of the town and the townspeople.

Mitchell views all this hypocrisy with tolerant good humour. As an artist, he is sensitive to the need for a delicate balance between laughter and tears, comedy and tragedy, as described in Ecclesiastes. He achieves a harmony, which is like real life, through the point and counterpoint of town and country, real and ideal, life and death, joy and sadness.

Mrs. Abercrombie, jowly and santimonious, covers her essential misanthropy with a thin veneer of Christian morality. A wolf in sheep's clothing, she heads the forces of hypocrisy and evil in the town. An avowed presbyterian, her real religion is materialism and her gospel is hate and prejudice. Warren Tallman, in his article "Wolf in the Snow" which appeared in Canadian Literature, No. 5, attributes the failure of her ultimate downfall to provide a catharsis to Mitchell's over indulgent tolerance. However, the slow deflation of this balloon filled with hot air is intentionally without drama. She is without substance, just a mask, and to make her unmasking a powerful event would mean the attributing of special powers to her. The author acknowledges the flatness of her defeat in the closing paragraphs of chapter thirty.

There was upon the faces of the board member the same look: that of a boy who has waited for the explosion of a giant cannon firecracker, and has been given instead the disappointing whoosh of a dud.17

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16 Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow", part one, Canadian Literature, No. 5, p. 11.

17 Mitchell, p. 288.
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang, but a whimper.

The function of Mrs. Abercrombie in the town is analagous to the role of Saint Sammy on the prairie. Their religion is false and the possibility for evil exists everywhere. Saint Sammy is a reminder that even the Promised Land must be protected from the unregenerate.

Brian's is a fairy tale world and his adults are defined in childish archetypes. Good and evil, they play out the conflicts which threaten the serenity of his small world. Slowly, he becomes aware of ambiguities; it becomes less easy to define the peripheral beings that touch his consciousness. Only experience can reveal the truth, which he has originally approached intuitively. Miss MacDonald, seen through the eyes of a six year old, is thoroughly evil, and the young Ben's rescue of Brian from the influence of her wrath is heroic. She is power without wisdom or humanity. However, Brian's mother looks beyond the apparent with compassion. It is this kind of insight which Brian must and does develop.

The town appears to be divided into three moral types; the hypocrites, headed by Mrs. Abercrombie, her despicable daughter, and Mr. Powelly, the vengeful minister; the almost impotent initiates, Svarich, Digby, Milt Palmer and Miss Thompson; and the victims, notably old Wong and the China Kids. The initiates are unable to overcome hypocrisy within the stifling confines of the town. They are only occasionally able to win a minor skirmish in the major war. Hislop is driven out for his ecclesiastical doubts and ecumenical leanings. Svarich, by nature of his birth, will always be an outsider.
Digby, the philosopher teacher, and Miss Thompson, because of their vocation, have the greatest potential. They are unable to prevent the brutal ritual leading to the suicide of Old Wong, but they hopefully can instill a sense of responsibility in the young.

In times of stress, Brian instinctively moves from the town to the prairie. His exodus is not an escape from reality but a recognition of a higher reality. The chief tensions of the novel are generated by the contrast between the town, with its false religion, and the prairie, with its fundamental truths. The town, with its religion, civil laws and medicine, has upset the rhythms of nature. The prairie has not lost its harmony with the natural cycle. Brian's ear is a stethoscope, sensitive to the earth's message. He wants to lie down on the prairie and hear its music.

It is through the deaths of his father, his grandmother, and his pets that Brian really learns the meaning of life. His experiences with death are realized in a romantic refusal to mourn, "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh." The prairie teaches him that death is merely an assertion of continuing life, a revitalizing phase of the cycle. The prairie becomes the landscape of his mature mind as he transcends the pain of physical death and maps out the future. The young Ben, who is always there to preside over the burial of his dead pets on the prairie, becomes Brian's alter ego in the quest for God. Together, they bury the past in the prairie and look toward a future that is theirs to shape.

Brian's mother and father never really leave the fairy-tale world of childhood. They are not tainted by the spiritual turmoil of the town, although they partake of its ceremonial facade. Because the father is drawn so large in the eyes of the child, Brian
cannot accept the meaning of his death within the context of the town. Spiritually, the father too belongs to the regenerate prairie and Brian must go there to feel the pulse of the wind and find life in death.

All around him the wind was in the grass with a million timeless whisperings.

A forever and forever sound it had, forever and for never. Forever and forever the prairie had been, or his father, or his father, or his father before him. Forever for the prairie; never for his father-never again.

People were forever born; people forever died, and never were again. Fathers died and sons were born; the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering through the long dead grasses. Through the long and endless silence. Winter came and spring and fall, then summer and winter again; the sun rose and set again, and everything that was once-was again-But for man, the prairie whispered-never-never. For Brian's father-never.18

Hope resides in the flowers of the new season and not in the dried remembrances of years past. Brian is the manifestation of that sense of optimism which permeates the hard and insistent toil of the prairie people. He is new life girded with a knowledge of the immediate and historical past and a developing sense of the overall design of life. The silence of the prairie has its own profound music and the boy has capacity to listen.

Where spindling poplars lift their dusty leaves and wild sunflowers stare, the gravestones stand among the prairie grasses. Over then a rapt and endless silence lies. This soil is rich.19

In *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Mitchell's view of the world is primarily one of simplistic optimism, the dualities which exist in man and nature are sharply defined as in fairy tale or allegory. There

18Ibid., p. 246.

is no doubt that good will triumph over evil. Brian makes black and white distinctions between the town and the prairie, between regenerate and degenerate people. Experience will probably teach Brian that there are many shades between the poles and the hardest decisions will be made in the area of limbo and not the obviously defined kingdoms of heaven and hell. The boys quest for transcendental reality, although disturbed by the presence of decadent forces, is unchecked by the negative power of doubt.

As For Me and My House, by Sinclair Ross, presents a more complex view of reality. It is not so easy to define the distinction between light and darkness in Horizon, archetypal small town on the prairie. Ross's questors are more mature, more cynical in their anguished probing for meaning in the known and unknown. It is the same prairie but a different point of view that Ross describes. There are many ways of looking at the blackbird, the One has many disguises. Brian O'Connal and the Bentleys originate in the same reality and share the same ultimate objective, but the quality of the journey is different.
CHAPTER II

As For Me and My House

As W. H. New pointed out in his article "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World", in the Spring 1969 issue of Canadian Literature, As For Me and My House manifests an ambiguous attitude toward the regenerative potential of a small prairie town, ironically named Horizon. Ross's world is far bleaker than the optimistic landscape of W.O. Mitchell. Mitchell's town is situated in the middle of a Promised Land; Ross's is on the edge of the world, or on the double edged sword of the Japanese samurai, for in every promise is the inherent possibility of agony and despair. For the Bentleys, there is no God within, and every desperate movement toward the God without is burdened by the permutations of failure.

Ross's is a brutal quest, where the equal possibilities of success or failure result in the dead average of human existence. The enthusiasm of the romantic quest is polarized by the overwhelming evidence of neutralizing reality. Day after day, Mrs. Bentley records the searing data of desperation, which, like the dust of the prairie, almost smothers the archetypal language of hope that counterpoints the grimness of her record. As For Me and My House is a seesaw teetering between the extremes of hope and despair and we wait endlessly for the shifting of weight that will end the stalemate.

In his article, W.H. New challenges the prevailing critical opinion that tends to accept Mrs. Bentley's self-centred view of reality. According to Mr. New, Ross does not share her romantic optimism at the end of the novel, or her self-conception of herself as victim. The full weight of the degenerate forces which check the symbolic language of optimism is considered.
Typically, Ross ends the novel with the possibility that can either mean salvation or simply another horizontal move deeper into despair. He makes it clear that at many points along the locus of a man's life, there is the power, free will, to overcome or to simply continue the desperate charade. The fate of the Bentleys is never resolved. The will to continue is all the hope we are given.

Structurally, the novel follows the pattern of hope through the seasons, from springtime to springtime. There is no doubt that April is the cruelest month. The formal ritual of rebirth is neutralized by the cold winter wind that puts a chill on the spring. Judith's baby is born in April, but he is premature and as frail as the ties that bind the Bentleys. It is in April that the diary begins, when the Bentleys move into the depressing vicarage with its stained wallpaper and oppressively low ceilings. Another spring, another job, another agonizing cycle.

In his ironical use of the archetypal language of hope, Ross almost erases the impact of the mythology of superfluous romanticism, yet in the persistence of life is an assertion that the desire for perfection still exists in the minds and hearts of the people. As we are rotated through the cycle of birth, copulation and death, we are constantly reminded that the circle itself is arbitrary. The passage of time is no promise of dialectic progress, as it appears to be in *Who Has Seen the Wind*. The son Philip is the focus of promise at the end of the novel, but we are also reminded that the father Philip was a boy too. Mrs. Bentley, surrogate mother to
the elder Philip, will be mother to the boy. She has willed it. There is a crushing irony in that "I want it so."^21

Horizon's wind only brings destruction. Sometimes that destructive power can be interpreted as divine justice, as when after Judith's death the wind knocks the town flat. However, the wind itself will not bring regeneration. It is up to the men of the town to build a new life on the ruins of the old. The wind is associated with the theme of punishment which permeates the novel. Through the weary eyes of Mrs. Bentley, it is a destroyer, lacking the capacity to breathe new life into the prairie. Instead of relieving the monotony of their existence, the wind is a source of fear and apprehension. "Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned."^22

We are reminded of the vanity of striving after the wind ("Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid"), rather than the rewards of penetrating its mysteries. The romantic symbolism of inspirational wind is negated in the angry power of the prairie storm. Even the poppy, relative of the anemone, traditional wind flower of popular mythology, is unable to withstand its force. Its petals are scattered as soon as they bloom and they are left to dry out and die on the prairie.

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^21Sinclair Ross. As For Me and My House, p. 165. The ambiguity of this final resolution of Mrs. Bentley is discussed in W.H. New's "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," Canadian Literature No. 40 (Spring 1969). The quality of Mrs. Bentley's judgement is strained. Inherent in her determination to proceed on the quest she has charted are the equal possibilities of success or failure.

^22Ibid., p. 5.
Rain, usually associated with relief and fertility, is merely a nuisance when it descends on Horizon. It means colds, leaks and musty smells to Mrs. Bentley. The rain falls to ruin the crops, not to feed them when they need it. The "Thin disheartening drizzle" is like Chinese water torture, drip, dripping across the roofs of their minds. The water leaves an ugly stain, instead of thriving wheat-field, in its wake. Finally, when they need it and it will not come, the farmers are forced to pray for rain.

Let us labor not in vain,
Hear us Father, send us rain.23

The Gardens in the Rain piece that Mrs. Bentley once learned to play on the piano is a mockery of the function of rain in her life. Her garden is a failure. She is as inept with flowers as she is with people and the garden will not grow in spite of her. So far, she has failed to direct the water to provide an Eden in the desert.

The edges of Mrs. Bentley's words are filled with the dust that threatens to submerge and smother the town. The wind, the sand, and the dust take on all their negative aspects in the novel. No roots will sink down and take hold. The dust moves about capriciously, challenging the will to persevere. This dust is no fertilizer. It is sterile, without life.

The men in Ross's world have failed to live harmoniously with nature. In the struggle to overcome the elements, they have lost their sensitivity and are unable to move flexibly with the seasons. Ross has personified the natural environment to such an extent that, at times, the environment has more reality than the people who move about with it. The wind, the snow and the rain respond to man, often wreaking vengeance on the town, as after Judith's
death, but man often fails to respond to nature; he simply endures. The harshness of winter is a punishment for the refusal to adapt.

The town Horizon is so typical that it might be anywhere on the prairie. It has the false fronts and narrow hypocrisy of many of the prairie towns of literature, including Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* and Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. It is all the Main Streets of Philip Bentley's discouraging career in the ministry and has all the diseases of mankind in microcosm. Mrs. Bentley recognizes all of the towns in each one of her husbands drawings.

It's like all the rest, a single row of false fronted stores, a loiterer or two, in the distance the prairie again. And like all the rest there's something about it that hurts. False fronts ought to be laughed at, never understood or pitied. They're such outlandish things, the front of a store built up to look like a second storey. They ought always to be seen that way, pretentious, ridiculous, never as Philip sees them, stricken with a look of self awareness and pity.24

The town and the organized church are hollow inside their false fronts. There is no vitality in the people or their beliefs. The church and the town thrive on bigotry. Horizon is a WASP community, whose partisanship excludes it from the exalted company, to borrow from Paul's philological catalogue, of heaven.

As soon as the Bentleys drive out with Paul into the country, they feel the difference. The farmers have never lost touch with the origins of religious ritual. Although subject, even more than the townspeople, to the changing will of fate, they are somehow able to articulate the spirituality that is a mockery in the uncomprehending mouths of the townspeople. The simple goodness of families like the Lawson makes the Bentleys and Paul, who has forsaken the country for

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the town, and is painfully aware of the consequences, feel small
and inadequate. Philip Bentley can adapt to the church in Horizon,
filling it with the false sounds of piety, but at the Partridge
Hill schoolhouse, where the country services are held, his voice
is an echo that returns to haunt him and his wife. Mrs. Bentley,
for all her faults, recognizes the proximity of truth to the
country schoolhouse.

They were a sober work roughened congregation. There
was strength in their voices when they sang, like the
strength and darkness of the soil. The last hymn was
staidly orthodox, but throughout it there seemed to
mount something primitive, something that was less a
response to Philip's sermon and scripture reading than
to the grim futility of their own lives. Five years in
succession now, they've been blown out, dried out, hailed
out; and it was as if in the faces of so blind and un­
caring a universe they were trying to assert themselves,
to insist upon their own meaning and importance.
"Which is the source of all religion, Paul discussed
it with me afterwards. "Man can't bear to admit his
insignificance. If you've ever seen a hailstorm, or
watched a crop dry up -- his helplessness, the way he's
ignored-well, it was just such helplessness in the
beginning that set him discovering gods who could con­
trol the storms and seasons. Powerful, friendly gods­
on his side.25

In Mrs. Bentley's description of the country people and Paul's
explanation of their admirable belief in man's ability to overcome his
natural adversaries, himself included, is an explicit statement of
puritanism.26 In the behaviour of the townspeople, with their


26In their acceptance of changing seasonal patterns and in their
determinism, the country people appear to be essentially Calvinistic.
However, there is very little sense of the belief that they have been
"chosen" for salvation, regardless of personal behaviour, which turns
Abraham in Adele Wisman's The Sacrifice, into a grotesque. The rural
people are more nearly puritanical in their perseverance against
adversity, which is an assertion of free will, or man's personal
responsibility for salvation through regenerate behaviour.
psychological witchhunts and obsession with a set of values only superficially Christian is a false puritanism, lacking the vitality necessary for the struggle for individual salvation. On the other hand, the farmers are admirable in their more pragmatic endeavours to continue in the face of cruel realities. Ross's real hope is in these people. Their simple quest after decency and continuing life, animal and vegetable, is an assertion of positive values. It is significant that the child Mrs. Bentley hopes will break the sterile curse of her life is carried by a country girl, who has come to the town and escaped it finally in the simultaneous experience of life and death.

The visit to the ranch, which the Bentleys had hoped would be a tonic to their flaccid spirits, is just another exercise in futility. The ranch is Ezekiel's valley, where sexuality, instead of being an aspect of regeneration, is associated with carnality. The puritan conscience is outraged by the ascendancy of the body over the spirit. On the ranch, there is no correspondence between sacred and profane love. Mrs. Bentley finds a picture of a bull over her bed and is unsettled by the strangeness of the environment. The expatriate theme, which runs through every sequence of the novel, is most acutely felt on the ranch. There is a distinct disparity between the farmer and

[27] The function of the country people in As For Me and My House is analogous to that of William Faulkner's negro, who, because of his continued association with the earth and overwhelming concern with the supernatural and religious doctrine, conditions largely determined by his subjugation by the white man, escapes the process of degeneration inherent in the false codes of civilization.
the rancher and Mrs. Bentley is sensitive to the difference. Her description of the topography echoes that of the biblical wilderness. "The close black hills, the stealthy slipping sound of the river made it was as if I were entering dead, forbidden country, approaching the lair of terror that destroyed the hills, that was lurking there still among the skulls."  

She knows she and Philip don't belong there. It is partly because of the ecclesiastical pose that they have conditioned over the years and partly the corruption of the ranch that makes them refuse to compromise in their heart of hearts;

I must admit that Philip isn't showing up to advantage here. He can't make the cowboys forget he's a preacher, and at mealtimes they all look awkward and uncomfortable. For so many years he's spoken only when he has something to say that his attempts now to be conversational make him sound like a priggish young evangelist, I find myself a little the same way too at times. I speak or laugh, and suddenly in my voice catch a hint of the benediction. It just means, I suppose, that all these years the Horizons have been working their will on me. My heresy, perhaps, is less than I sometimes think.  

The psychological tensions generated by all the polarities, human and environmental, physical and spiritual, that Ross has established in the novel are under very tight and apparent linguistic control. Ross shapes and manipulates his grotesques. He uses language to control the subjectivity of human relationships. Just at the point when the high frequency of emotions threatens to shatter the mind, he relaxes the tautness of his stylistic wires. Through the careful choice and repetition of diction, he shapes the attitudes of Mrs. Bentley and the reader.

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Often, the rhythm of the diary echoes biblical cadences, creating a dualistic liturgy of hope and despair. Through the careful juxtaposition of black and white, he achieves the aesthetically interesting quality of a heterogeneous greyness, which, although depressing, manifests signs of life in its variations. The pervading greyness is broken only by the red of Steve's tie and the occasional relief of fuchsia's and poppies. There is a lively monotony in Mrs. Bentley's nightmare. It saves the novel from melodrama and strengthens its relationship with reality.

Ross manipulates language, as Mrs. Bentley does, to affect our consciousness. In the cases of Mrs. Bentley and Paul, language is an impediment to reality for both characters attempt to give universal definitions approached through a very particular personal bias. For both of them, the names becomes more important than the thing, obscuring their vision of the world. Plato regarded the exploration of the possibilities of language as a means to truth. Ross proves that there are as many ways to approach the shadows on the wall of the cave as there are people to interpret them. On one level, Mrs. Bentley controls what we know by selecting carefully, perhaps unconsciously, what she chooses to describe and how she describes it. At the same time, Ross makes it very clear that she is leading us through a labyrinth of her own making.

On the whole, critical judgement of Mrs. Bentley had been gentlemanly on the side of naivete. Roy Daniells even goes so far as to call her "pure gold and wholly credible".30 She is wholly

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credible all right. Through language, we see facets of her character she never dreams she is revealing. Her sensitivity and intelligence, which can never be denied, have been worn down by the relentless sun, wind and sand into a clever and destructive bitterness. She looks at her world through grey tinted glasses, never giving the town or her husband a chance to come out from under the heavy weight of her judgement.

Donald Stephens speaks of her "major redeeming feature (which) is her earnest desire for reconciliation with her husband" and yet feels obliged to acknowledge that the possibility is her only alternative to the desperation of real loneliness. 31 Superficially, defined in her own terms, she wants a harmonious relationship between herself, her husband and her God; yet still she persists in trying to keep herself at the centre of the universe. She wants to be the earth mother, manipulating husband and step-son in a world she has created. It is ironic that she lacks the capacity to give life. Her only child was born dead. The symbolism of her negative capabilities as a wife and mother are too obvious to ignore. She is a destroyer, not a creator. The real white goddess is Judith and Mrs. Bentley is unable to undermine what she is, either in life or death. Judith, tall and white like a gothic spire, is closer to the perfection they are all after than any of them realize. She alone is able to transcend the hypocrisy of the town, exists like the young Ben outside its morality, and Philip, the spoiled priest, knows it.

Mrs. Bentley's view is deliberately one-sided. Her judgments of her husband, although couched in sympathy and protestations of his true worth, work insidiously on the mind of the reader. It is she who describes him as a hypocrite and a failure. We see the thin white line of his mouth and hear the perpetual slamming of the library door that wears on her already badly frayed nerves, but she never fully comprehends what motivates his behaviour toward her. The martyrish description of her shabby clothes and furniture suggest a whine that is just as intolerable as his refusal to allow the catharsis of a confrontation. He simply refuses to allow her to manipulate him.

The possibility of her redemption through music is as ambivalent as every relationship and experience she becomes involved in. She uses the piano constantly as a device to irritate her husband and bangs on it in defiance of the town. She cultivates her talent, not as a means of approaching God, but as a form of vanity. She is guilty about the luxury of a piano and that guilt gives her pleasure. Mrs. Bentley, whose final negation resides in the fact that we never even learn her first name, has been so careful to distinguish between what she regards as truth and illusion and to separate her false religion from herself that she fails to see the potential wholeness of her gift or the ubiquitousness of the God she feigns to worship. She uses the secular music she plays to flagellate the town and the vestiges of her puritanical conscience, failing to realize that all music, like all things, are in God's dominion. It take the old clergymen from Randolph and his wife to remind her of this.
"Perhaps they expected hymns. I played two Chopin walzes, and they exclaimed politely that all music was sacred."³² It is Judith who approaches the music of the seven spheres. In the church, only her voice can be heard over the sound of the wind.³³

While Ross upholds the puritannical notion of individualism, he makes it clear that Mrs. Bentley perverts her prerogatives. She desires personal freedom from the hypocritical mores of the town, while at the same time endeavouring to force her will on others. Her attitude toward the people she uses, notably Philip, Judith, Steve and Paul, is superficially charitable, but she is scarcely able to disguise the will to manipulate all four.

Her cruelty to Judith is intolerable in spite of Judith's violation of the mundane laws of hospitality and marriage. Intuition immediately tells her of the attraction between her husband and the girl and she deliberately dangles Judith in front of him. Satanically, she tempts them in the wilderness. She watches them grow closer and closer physically after perceiving their spiritual affinities and seems to enjoy it as much as a cat playing with a pair of cooperative mice.

³² Sinclair Ross, p. 82.

³³ Judith appears not to share a common fear of the wind. In the Calvinist sense, she is one of the elect. The wind cannot destroy her, because she is a part of it. Her song is equal to the power of the wind. "The rest of us, I think, were vaguely and secretly a little afraid. The strum and whimper were wearing on our nerves. But Judith seemed to respond to it, ride up with it, feel in the way a singer feels an orchestra. There was something feral in her voice, that even the pace and staidness of her hymn could not restrain." (p. 38).
It is seldom he listens to music, but as soon as she began tonight he turned in his chair behind the pulpit and sat with his eyes fixed on her all the way through the hymn. I could see him in the little mirror over the organ that's there for the organist to watch the progress of the collection plate, and know when its time to taper off the offertory. Even after she had finished he sat a few minutes without stirring. There was an uneasy clearing of throats and rustling of hymnbooks as the congregation waited for him.

Mrs. Bentley knows her Christmas present to the pregnant Judith will hurt and she admits it in a later flash of guilt. The oranges she sends later are: an awkward gesture of forgiveness, but even they are received with anguish. If she hadn't been instrumental in bringing Philip and Judith together, observing the whole relationship with morbid pleasure, her subtle cruelties could be rationalized as those of a woman wronged, but it is all contrived, right down to her decision to adopt the issue of her husband and Judith. When Judith dies, she is remarkably callous. "I'm glad she's gone -- glad for her sake as much as ours. What was there ahead of her now anyway? If I lost Philip what would there be ahead of me."

Next to Judith, the boy Steve suffers most from her selfishness. One of the reasons Steve never becomes three dimensional in the novel is her refusal to regard him as a human being. He is a pawn to her. She plans to use him to cement her relationship with her husband, but when the boy makes his own demands for Philip's love, she cuts him off. The boy's need for love, which Philip is best able to express through the awkward giving of gifts, she interprets as selfish materialism. It gives her pleasure to turn the knife in

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Philip by taking the boy from him, luring him with music that evokes memories of the past. She refuses to become a real mother to him. When he leaves, she mistakes his bravery for indifference and is relieved to have Philip to herself again, never thinking of the effect of the severed relationship will have on the boy. Later, she lies in bed, satisfied, with only one regret, that Philip hasn't come to see the boy as she has. "I wish, though, that Steve had gone differently, not quite so soon. Because in a little while Philip would have found him out, seen him plain, another given me my turn again."

When Philip turns in desperation to Judith, she plans her revenge, developing an imaginary relationship with Paul. There is no evidence that Paul regarded her in any way but with friendship, but she uses him to feed her ego and incense her husband.

Philip suffers consistently from her honey coated sting. She knows all the ways to irritate him. That much can be said of their twelve years together. Even the gift of oil paints, bought with the money meant to buy their freedom, is wrapped up in her own martyrdom and self pity. Philip has married a very clever adversary. She is the most accomplished hypocrite of all.

The minister is the negative pole of the electric tensions of the novel. Withdrawal is his answer to the unbearable pressures of his life. He lacks the tenacity of the farmers or even of his wife and, judged by puritannical standards, is weak in his refusal to fight. He appears to have abandoned the quest that his life started out to be. Rather than struggling to overcome his illegitimacy and skepticism, he chains himself on the wheel of his own guilt and feelings of inadequacy.

Ross's ambivalent view of reality is poignantly manifested in Philip's attitude toward the train, conventional symbol of phallic energy and the romantic journey. Originally, the train appears to Philip as a way out of the dismal towns to a better life, "Always the train, roaring away to the world that lay beyond", but, as the years and the small towns wear away his optimism, the train becomes a grim reminder of failure, "It was the train again, reminding him of the outside world he hasn't reached." 38

Judith shares Philip's excitement about the romantic possibilities of the train. She strains beyond the wretchedness of life in the small town. Ultimately, for her, the only way out is death.

It wasn't long till I started making excuses down to the station at night when the train came in. Mrs. Finley forbade it, but I would slip out anyway. It always excited me, the glare of the headlight, the way the engine swept in steaming and important, the smoky oily smell. On the farm, you know, we didn't see trains very often. When it was gone I'd stand by myself on the platform watching the green tail light disappear past the elevators, listening to the whistle, two long, two short at every crossing. 39

Often when she is reflecting Mrs. Bentley seems to understand the forces that motivate her husband. She sees all the small towns oppressing his spirit and yet she lacks the emotional strength to cope with his frustrations. All her sympathy is spread over the past and the future. She is unable to live with the daily manifestations of his neurosis.

It is clear to her that Philip, due to the circumstances of his childhood, is unprepared for a complete relationship with a woman. Instead of becoming a wife, she is a surrogate mother. When she demands more, he is confused. The archetypal mother and father of his youthful dreams, the reality was too painful, belong to the "train" world of illusion. Real people, like his wife, disappoint his notion of perfection. Judith, as a woman, comes closer to the abstract. Philip, a "child-man", is a prisoner in the limbo which exists between the illusion of the past and the reality of the present.

Philip only knows he must suffer; for his birth, for the ideals he is no closer to, and for his inability to communicate. He accepts even Steve's departure as inevitable punishment "for he's the kind that keeps his hypocrisy beside him the way a guilty monk would keep his scourge." The theme of flagellation is painfully repeated over and over again in the novel. Suffering is the only way back into the state of grace.

The emotionally inarticulate man turns to art as a means of expressing his spirituality. However, as Mrs. Bentley shrewdly perceives, even the drawings are cramped by the stifling environment. Still, in the drawings, the will to overcome persists and her recognition of this spurs her encouragement of a new life outside of the ministry. Philip knows exactly what his painting means to him. His is a pre-renaissance view of art and it echoes the gothic themes in the novel.

Religion and art, he says, are almost the same thing anyway. Just different ways of taking man outside of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we

call ecstasy or rapture. They're both a rejection of the material, common sense world for the one that's illusory, yet somehow more important. Now it's always when a man turns away from this common sense world that he begins to create, when he looks into a void, and has to give it life and form.\footnote{41}

Whether or not Philip is a good artist is irrelevant. The fact is if he can find grace through this medium, even if he can't convey it to others, he will have succeeded in finding his way out of the wilderness. Whether he does or not is one of the ambiguities Ross leaves with us at the end of the novel. Philip had always been an idealist, but, on the other hand, he has never realized his goals.

Desperately, Philip tries to rewrite his own childhood through his relationship with the boy Steve. Steve, Catholic and illegitimate, is a pariah in the protestant town. His reactions are typical, but Ross reminds us that we are seeing him through eyes prejudiced by jealousy and fear. The boy's suffering is callously ignored by Mrs. Bentley, who is only willing to record the weaknesses. Finally, she is able to convince Philip that he has failed to make the boy love him, taking the tortured man one step further into despair, which he bravely rationalizes as self-knowledge.

Steve's been good for me. The last few days I've been really down to earth, looking myself over. The way he dropped out on me- the unimportance of it to everyone else- it made me realize you're a fool not to be just as casual with life as life is with you. Take things as they come- get what you can out of them. Don't want or care too much for anything.\footnote{42}
This is the low ebb of the man's life and of the novel. The experience with Steve appears to have finally shattered the dream once and for all. However, Philip bounces back to the challenge of a new son, his own this time. Ross is remarkably restrained in his description of the boy Steve. It is almost as if the release of all the power behind the episode will upset aesthetic distance. He refuses to turn something real into a cheap catharsis. It is possible that Steve is Ross himself, and, the economy of pathos in description of the boys' abuse is stringently imposed by the artist in order to avoid melodrama.

Paul Kirby, who introduced Steve to the Bentleys' in the first place, is another character who is limited to the confines of Mrs. Bentley's imagination. His function very much like the Shakespearean philosopher fool, giving insight and meaning to the rest of the characters but never fully realized himself. Mrs. Bentley uses him in her relationship with her husband, but he is never drawn into her conspiracy. He largely stays outside of the action, commenting on the nature of things. He is equipped to understand much of what he sees, for he is the existentialist outsider. He belongs neither to the town nor the country and his wisdom embraces both.

He's so humble about being a country boy, yet so stubbornly proud of it. Humble because it's born in his country bones to be that way, because he still shares instinctively the typical countryman's feeling of disadvantage before townspeople who wear smarter clothes and write a finer hand. Proud because he's come to know these town people and see them for what they really are, to discover that most of his own values have been sounder all the time.43

The aesthetic, thematic and stylistic importance of language in the novel is realized in the philological leanings of Paul. The philosopher, like the literary artist, is constrained by the potential of words. Words are, ironically, at the same time the conveyors of truth and superficial masks for the deep structure or meaning of language. Paul's semantic games are deadly serious. He is attempting to define reality. Sometimes his revelations are painful, sometimes grotesque, and sometimes funny. In presenting Paul in this way, Ross is giving evidence of his own concern for words and warning of the danger inherent in taking them at their face value. Mrs. Bentley is a clever manipulator of words, but, with Ross's help, she is hoisted on her own petard. She gives away much that she would sooner have us ignore.

Judith West lacks the intellect of Paul Kirby, but she too is striving after meaning. She has a spiritual reality that fails to find its correspondent in the real world. Described as a rebel, she doesn't fit into the context of the community. Philip senses her fecund spirituality and finds that the two of them, spiritual exiles from the town, are able to communicate and achieve in their relationship a union of the physical and the spiritual. Judith has special gifts. Her voice can be heard in the wilderness. "The wind was too strong for Philip or the choir, but Judith scaled it when she sang alone before the closing hymn." She is the singer, the interpreter of the will of God. The sexual union between Philip and Judith is a ritual act that contains the promise of new life, which is the only positive

note in the book. Her child will hopefully lead the way to the Promised Land. Philip and Mrs. Bentley believe it, although Ross makes sure that the optimism surrounding his birth is tempered by recollections of frustrated hopes in the past.

The theme of Judith's sacrificial death is introduced by Paul. "There was a short silence: then noticing the book of organ music I had with me he said abruptly, 'Did you know that the word offertory comes from a word meaning sacrifice?" Judith is the small town's offering to the angry gods and the reward if peace after the storm. Her death culminates the puritanical motif of sacrifice in the novel. Death, in the case of Judith and of all mankind, means continuing life. Her death is linked to sexual themes which also underlines the basic puritanism of Ross's view of the world. Like the biblical Judith, she has the power to save the town from the tyranny of decadence. Her real martyrdom is an ironic comment on the false martyrdom of the minister's wife. She is the El Greco madonna, the real earth mother, whose life and death consummates the marriage between heaven and earth.

W.O. Mitchell and Sinclair Ross, in Who Has Seen the Wind and As For Me and My House are preoccupied with the quest after transcendental reality, ideal terms in which the environment can be interpreted. Only through an understanding of heaven can man penetrate the mysteries of the earth. Although Brian and the Bentley's are distinct as travellers and Brian's view of the universe is considerably less complicated than that of the Bentley's who have endured a season in hell, they are

\(^{45}\)Op. cit., p. 8. Paul's philological explanations, although often futile efforts to organize reality, provide touchstones around which thematic motifs develop.
moving in the same direction -- vertically, out of mutable time. They struggle out of chaos toward a transcendental order.

Hagar Shipley, the larger than life sized heroine of Margaret Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel*, moves at right angles to the spiritual questors, Brian and the Bentleys. She has rejected organized religion, is her own god and is constantly struggling to escape the dogmatic patterns of the great designer. A search for her own personal order constitutes the nature of her quest. The journey takes the pilgrim in many directions. Margaret Laurence rejects the promise of life everlasting in favour of a heaven on earth. She shares the symbolic vocabulary of Ross and Mitchel, but uses it for different purposes. Ultimately, her characters must reconcile their differences with the real world. That is all there is.
CHAPTER III

The Stone Angel

Margaret Laurence's personal odyssey can be measured in terms of miles and of words. In a relatively short life, she is still in her early forties, she has considered many countries of the world and of the mind. The human landscape is her specialty and she considers it with the grace of a skilled traveller. From a small town in Manitoba, Mrs. Laurence has journeyed to the far corners of the world, searching for the peace which is the reward for self knowledge. Analogous to her peripatetic life style is her art, which wanders through the minds of her creations, men and women, with an occasionally breathtaking reality. In her finer work, fiction becomes fact as her characters jump off the page, ceasing to exist as the book of what we are and become instead the people who populate the highways of life.

Often ignoring the possibility of transcendental reality, Mrs. Laurence moves horizontally across the landscape. Unlike many of the artists who endeavour to give meaning to the prairie by reconciling the physical and the spiritual, the real and the ideal, she is very much concerned with the immediate, with the knowing of the mutable self. It is the empirical realities of time and place which embellish the texture of her novels and the lives of her characters. She is very much the aristotalian, concerning herself with the life within rather than the possibility of perfection. To be content in
this world is everything. A delight in the pleasures of the flesh is always in ascendancy over the concerns of the spirit.

Because Margaret Laurence's characters must reconcile themselves with the real world, the restlessness of spirit which leads others to a study of the metaphysical, of the effect of the macrocosm on the microcosm, motivates constant movement, emotional and physical, out of oppressing situations. Rachel Cameron's answer to a jest of God is a journey to a new life. Similarly, Hagar Shipley, like Mrs. Laurence herself, abandons the small town. Manawaka is a looking glass through which she sees aspects of herself she would rather ignore. She escapes the mirrors temporarily, but she cannot leave herself behind. The optimistic promise of a new life somewhere else is dulled by the inescapable influence of the past upon the present and the future. Hagar Shipley attempts to fool herself, "To move to a new place that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you." But she knows, and Mrs. Laurence wants us to know, that the heavy baggage of self can only be temporarily checked on the journey.

Like her biblical predecessor, Hagar Shipley moves about in a wilderness of her own making. All her life, she longs for something her pride will not let her define. It is a triumph for the prairie that she finally finds the answer is not environmental but personal. The quest, manifested in the journey motif, is ultimately not physical but emotional. All the time, she has been moving back and forth from

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the prairie to the coast, from her son's house to the fish cannery, where her mind has its last triumph over the crumbling flesh, she has really been blindly raging against herself.

All of Margaret Laurence's major characters, to date, are women. The preoccupation with the feminine view of reality, which she, as a woman, seems to be most at home with, serves to enhance the quality and validity of what she has to say as a writer and complicate the nature of the quest. Like D.H. Lawrence, who has allowed many of his female characters to take over the traditionally male romance motif, she complicates the journey of the soul by adding the particular restrictions of womanhood. The male wanderer often appears in the guise of the hero, as did the knights of chivalric romance and the dramatic figures of the American frontier. The woman, on the other hand, is bound by the rigid conventions of wifehood and motherhood. The assertion of self over familial obligations has been conventionally regarded as a desecration. Hagar Shipley's decision to leave her home and her husband, even though she takes the youngest child, has profound social and personal ramifications. What appears to her to be an act of desperation becomes an act of pride. Through Hagar and the other women she has created, Margaret Laurence has presented several facets of a modern dilemma. The sum total of their being is an articulate plea for the right of every woman to be an individual.

The novel, The Stone Angel, is carefully structured. Foreground, middleground and background of a life that has covered ninety

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47 Hagar Shipley in The Stone Angel, Rachel Cameron in A Jest of God, and her sister Stacey in The Fire Dwellers. All three women are involved in the struggle for personal freedom.
years are carefully woven together, through the association of stream of consciousness and memory, which are carefully juxtaposed to give complete insight into a woman whose largeness, physical and emotional, dominates every aspect of her life. Mrs. Laurence's technique is impressionistic; it is the juxtaposition of detail, past and present, that softens the symmetry of form and vitalizes the woman and her landscape. Past and present are meaningless without each other. Experience and memory are the colours which shade the forms of the present. Flowers, always a source of delight to Hagar, are both a positive assurance of life over death, in spite of the morbid funereality of lilac and lily of the valley, and an important structural device in the unified development of Hagar as she once was and as she now is.

As Hagar makes the journey through life, which thematically parallels her geographical and psychological movement, the relevance of the epigraph from Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" becomes painfully real. Birth, copulation and death are the realities of time. Death is inherent in the maddeningly quick progression of the phases of the life cycle. The ubiquitous presence of death enhances the need to live life completely, something Hagar, in her terrible pride, has been unable to do. Death is the end and not a new beginning. There is a necessity to rage against it. Time, running quickly through the hourglass, is the most formidable enemy in Hagar's struggle with herself. It has almost run out when she finally finds what it was she really wanted. The fifth stanza of Thomas' poem, written for his suffering father, is most appropriate to her.
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could gaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, Rage against the dying of the light.

Hagar, like the stone angel her father erected in his pride over
her mother's grave, is blind -- not like Gloucester, but like Lear.

Summer and winter she viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretence of sight. Whoever carved her had left her eyeballs blank.48

She is blind in her pride, which leaves her unequipped to perceive the disparity between illusion and reality, the world as it is and as she wants it to be. Hagar is basically a sensual woman whose artificial social values prevent her from communicating with those she loves and from rejoicing in the flesh. All her life, she allows the mask to impede her experience of reality. It destroys her marriage and her favourite son. Only at the end, triggered by Mr. Troy's singing of the hymn, does she "see with blinding sight" what she, in her pride and arrogance, has missed,

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth-tell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

She had always sought her grail in the wrong places. It was there within her all the time.

I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness that I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that - simple to rejoice. How is it I never could. I know, I know. How long have I known. Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed. Every good joy I might have held, in my man or in any child of mine or even

48Margaret Laurence. The Stone Angel, p. 3.
the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances—oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the hearts' truth?\footnote{Ibid., p. 292.}

Finally, Hagar is Lycidas' angel, turning homeward, alive at last.

In the world of her own mind, Hagar has created a religion of self. She is too large, too independant to succumb to the lure of organized religious ritual. The first religious experience in the novel describes her father's pride. Because he gave more for the building of a new church, he is one of the elect. Hagar, in her wisdom, knows the justice of that. The church was never her sacred place. If God ever existed for her, it was in the cathedral of trees that she describes in her final escape from Marvin and Doris. She is sincere in her cynicism with the young minister.

Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelation says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of topaz, like a gigantic chunk of costume jewelry. Saint John of Patmos can keep his sequinned heaven, or share it with Mr. Troy, for all I care, and spend eternity in fingering the gems and telling each other gleefully they're worth a fortune.\footnote{Op. cit., p. 120.}

Death offers no promise of Christian salvation. Hagar is pre-Christian, by name and disposition. She is described as the pharoah's daughter, the Egyptian, throughout her life, and desert imagery permeates the novel. Her straight black hair and monumental personality and stature recall the rigid statuary of Egypt's queens. There is nothing of the soft Christian madonna in her delineation. Her kingdom is the earth and she rides care-
lessly over it, missing the possibility of heaven on earth. The prairie and the city are her Minoan labyrinth and death is always a dead end. When she meets her obstacles, she does not attempt vertical escape, as did Icarus, but instead searches out another route. Margaret Laurence, an orphan herself, knows the futility of death. Hagar shares this attitude and is angered by her brother's mild acquiescence to the inevitable. She is disgusted by his impotence. He did not value life enough to rage against death.

"He went quietly" she said. "He didn't fight his death as some do. They only make it harder for themselves. Matt seemed to know there was no help for it", Mavis said. "He didn't struggle to breathe, or try to hang on. He let himself slip away."

I found this harder to bear than his death, even. Why hadn't he writhed, cursed, at least grappled with the thing.51

There is no quiet acceptance in her own death. She struggles to the end and dies taking the communion of life.

I wrest taking from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in My hands. There. There.
And them.52

In spite of Hagar's renunciation of religion, the conventional imagery of orthodox Christianity is woven into the fabric of the novel. The seagull in the room at the point, "a bird in the house means a death in the house", triggers religious associations, but it is also very real in the context of experience. Similarly, the sacramental pattern does not intrude upon the secular nature of the journey. Her revelation is a celebration of life and not some mystic ritual. However, the analogies enrich the value of her experience and the irony of her quest.

As explained in the Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Stone Angel*, the biblical analogies are not essential to explication of the character, Hagar Shipley, but "add another dimension to the book".\textsuperscript{53} Hagar, like the wife of Abraham, is indeed in bondage to her flesh. Her husband, Bram, is a modern Abraham, whose desire for a dynasty is betrayed by his own weakness and his wife's pride. He cannot make a Promised Land out of the desert. The possibility of regeneration inherent in the description of the marriage on a spring day,

It was spring that day, a different spring from this one. The poplar bluffs had budded with sticky leaves, and the frogs had come back to the sloughs and sang like choruses of angels with sore throats, and the marsh marigolds were opening like shavings of sun on the brown river where the tadpoles danced and the bloodsuckers lay slimy and low, waiting for the boys' feet. And I rode in the black topped buggy beside the man who was now my mate.\textsuperscript{54}

is quickly shattered by the emptiness of their life together. She never wishes to communicate with him until after he is dead; and then it is too late. The mother-son motif, which complements the dynastic theme in the Bible, is concentrated in the intense misdirected relationships between Hagar and her two sons Marvin and John. Reference to the biblical archetypes makes Hagar's fantasies doubley ironic.

Symbolically, Hagar is, of course, a wanderer in the wilderness through her own willfulness, like the biblical Hagar; the second wife of Bram Shipley, she resents and despises the memory of the first one as the biblical Hagar resent Sarah, Abraham's wife.

\textsuperscript{53} W.H. New, in his Introduction to the novel, argues the multiple possibilities of Hagar's symbolic identity. She is not so much a static figure in allegory as a real individual whose tragedy is enhanced by association.

\textsuperscript{54} Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, p. 50.
Bram Shipley, with his failure farm, is no patriarch—though sadly and ironically, he wishes to be one and hopes their first child will be a boy: "It would be someone to leave the place to,' he said. I saw then that he wanted his dynasty no less than my father had."55

From the first trip to the finishing school in Toronto to the final bus ride to Shadow Point and the fish cannery, Hagar is a wanderer. Always the realities are forsaken in favour of the illusion. She escapes from the prairie to the mannered social world of Toronto, where she learns skills she will never use as Bram Shipley's wife, and the snobbish values, which, after the original act of defiance that was her marriage, cause her to judge and condemn her husband; and she escapes him in a sudden flight to the west coast, where her son John is crucified emotionally by the illusions of respectability she has created. Her quest leads her from reality into illusion and finally, through the revelation of her last days, back to reality again. The children's game of "house", which she observes at the beach, is analogous to the games Hagar has always played. The scene in the novel serves as a book within a book where Hagar may read about herself. Always, she has interpreted reality on her own false terms. Doris, who is remarkably kind and patient with her ageing mother-in-law, is described as stupid and artificial. Bram is condemned from the start because his roughness does not conform to Hagar's rigid standards. There is always the need to escape what joy and solace these people can give her through a journey into the false self which is conventional and dead. The real Hagar has the ability to communicate, to give and take; but she finds out too late.

55 Clara Thomas. Margaret Laurence, p. 43.
Mrs. Laurence admits to a love-hate relationship with Hagar, whom she resents for her "authoritarian outlook" and loves "for her battling." She has articulated Hagar's journey not in terms of absolutes but as a matter of survival.

Perhaps I no longer believed so much in the promised land, even the promised land of one's own inner freedom. Perhaps an obsession with freedom is the persistent (thank God) dance of the young. With *The Stone Angel*, without my recognizing it at the time, the theme had changed to that of survival, the attempt of the personality to survive with some dignity, toting the load of excess mental baggage that everyone carries, until the moment of death.56

On her journey to the point, Hagar makes a painful reference to Coleridge's poem "The Ancient Mariner."57 Her voyage, like the mariner's, is physical and psychological. Both suffer physically and emotionally; both are involved in a journey of the flesh and the spirit.

Now that I've made my mind up, I become aware of my parched flesh. I've not had a drop of water since - I can't remember how long it's been. A long time. It's not the way I had imagined thirst would feel. My throat doesn't burn or feel particularly dry. But it's blocked and shut, and it pains me when I swallow. I can't drink sea-water-isn't it meant to be poisonous? Certainly. 'Water water everywhere nor any drop to drink.' That's my predicament, What else did I slay, for mercy's sake?58


57 p. 186. "What albatross did I slay, for mercy's sake? Well, well, we'll see - come on, old mariner, up and out of your smelly bunk and we'll see what can be found." Hagar's journey, like the mariner's, is complicated by guilt and pride, despair and optimism.

58 Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, p. 46.
Often, in the prairie novel, the environment itself is the most formidable adversary in the quest for peace. Small human figures pit themselves heroically against time and the elements. The prairie is personified and its behaviour is often interpreted as the will of God. Hagar's prairie is very real, but the desert is an extension of herself and not an external force to be contended with. Partly because it is an aspect of herself, she never really leaves it. There is nothing mystical about the miracle of spring in Manawaka. It just happens. Similarly, the bitterness of winter is accepted. The real enemy is within; her own rages are far more destructive than the prairie storms which alter the landscape but leave the mind intact. Hagar knows, by the time she dies, that external forces have not caused her unhappiness. She, alone, is responsible.

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched... Nothing can take away those years.59

Hagar's pride, inherited from her father, causes her to escape from the sensual world which is her greatest source of pleasure. The novel is rich with the sensory details which illuminate Hagar's potential for joy. Doris' cooking, the flowers which fill her life with perfume, and sex with Bram are all described with the loving care of one who realizes too late what they all have meant to her. Like the stone angel, she has resisted opening up her flesh to the things in which she has the capacity to rejoice. Clara Thomas

59Ibid., p. 292.
compares Mrs. Laurence's handling of detail to the virtuosity of E.J. Pratt. The book is alive with the sounds and smells, pleasant and unpleasant, of Hagar's lifetime. It is the author's ear for rhythms of speech and accurate description of sensory details that give substance to the amorphous shapes of emotion.

How anxious I was to be neat and orderly, imagining life had been created only to celebrate tidiness, like prissy Pippa as she passed. But sometimes through the hot rush of disrespectful wind that shook the scrub oak and the coarse couchgrass encroaching upon the dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead, the scent of cowslips would rise momentarily. They were tough-rooted, these wild and gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at the cemetery's edge, torn out by loving relatives, determined to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized, 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 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.

It is due partly to her puritanical background that Hagar is unable to reconcile the polarities of real and imaginary self.

The fierce virtues of the father are visited upon the daughter, who adopted the motto ("Gainsay Who Dare") and the pride of family

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60Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence, p. 43. "Mrs. Laurence handles her detail with the absolute assurance and authority that E.J. Pratt enunciated for the sea and ships of Hugh MacLennan for the Halifax explosion, or Gabrielle Roy for the sights and sounds of Montreal in the thirties."

61Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel, p. 5.

62"Gainsay Who Dare", the war cry of the Clanranald Macdonald, is Hagar's defiant cry against the world which is her battle ground. The motto and the pin bearing it are cheaply tossed away by Hagar's favourite son John, who has no use for the restrictions of tradition.
tradition. The struggle to perpetuate the illusion, respectability, makes it difficult for her to accept and enjoy reality. After the act of defiance that units Hagar with Bram Shipley in marriage, she realizes that she can only judge her easygoing husband according to the standards of her father. She will never respect him.

You'll never get anywhere in this world unless you work harder than others. I'm here to tell you that. Nobody's going to hand you anything on a silver platter. It's up to you, nobody else. You've got to have stick-to-itiveness if you want to get ahead. You've got to use a little elbow grease.

Unfortunately, Hagar, unlike Bram's former wife Clara, ("No cross No crown"), cannot accept the religious convictions that attend the ethic of puritanism. She is left with an empty shell. The religious and sexual motifs associated with Hagar's behaviour are culminated in the episode with Murray F. Lees at the fish cannery.

In those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right down from heaven, if she'd been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn't a sweeter place in all this world.

Clara Thomas considers the function of Lees, the alcoholic former Redeemers' Advocate, to be analogous to the function of the fool in King Lear. Indeed, like the Shakespearean fool, Lees is

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64 Bram Shipley's former wife, Clara, had embroidered the legend on the bookmark. Hagar has only contempt for the morbid practices of self flagellation associated with puritanism. However, she herself accepts the doctrine of individualism and hard work which are inherent in Clara's religion.


66 Thomas, p. 41.
the philosopher who is both in and out of the plot providing insight
into the value of experience. He becomes Hagar's real spiritual
mentor, ("God is love, but please don't mention the two in the
same breath") and, despite the apparent betrayal when he reveals
her hiding place to Marvin and Doris, he allows her the opportunity
for catharsis and finally the chance to bless the son she has
never recognized, the act which is her salvation.

In an attempt to repudiate the claim Bram Shipley has over
her body,

'His banner over me was love'. Where that comes
from, I can't now rightly say, or else for some
reason it hurts me to remember. He had a banner
over me for many years. I never thought it love,
though, after we wed. Love, I fancied, must consist
of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets, not
like the things he did sprawled on the high white
bedstead* that rattled like a train. Hagar rejected the son she
thought most like him. Marvin, inarticulate,
by her definition, till the end of the novel, where his words "She's
a holy terror" fill her with love, is the son she shuts out in
favour of John, who proves to be an Ishmael. John is associated
by her with Jacob, but it is a role he does not cherish.

I wish he could have looked like Jacob then,
wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing
a blessing from it with his might. But no. He
sweated and grunted angrily. His feet slipped and
he hit his forehead on a marble ear, and swore.
His arm muscles tightened and swelled and finally
the statue moved, teetered, and was upright once
more.69

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67 Margaret Laurence, The Stone Angel, p. 228.
68 Ibid., p. 80.
Just as the angel is not a real angel, John is not a real Jacob. It is Marvin who finally wrests the blessing from her on her tortured deathbed. He is the son of reality, not illusion. Her journey has taken her back to the place from which she started and that is not so bad after all.

Now it seems to me that he is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength and bargaining. "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me'. And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.\(^{70}\)

The circuitous pattern of Hagar's journey is completion of the human rather than the divine function. Rather than moving from self to God, as do Brian O'Connal, in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, and the Bentley's, in *As For Me and My House*, Hagar moves from self back to self. The sun of Ecclesiastes is, for Hagar, an objective correlative of the natural rather than the supernatural world. Her blessing of Marvin assures her completion and forgiveness in the real world.

Because her journey is limited, Hagar may be more successful than the spiritual questors, Brian and the Bentleys. Imperfect communion between man and God breaks the circle. This is the tragedy of Abraham in Adele Wiseman's novel *The Sacrifice* also.

Rachel Cameron, in *A Jest of God* has a more difficult task than Hagar. She is a negative presence and her journey takes her into the tangled wilderness of her own mind. A weak and frustrated individual, she is tempted by the sustaining potential of the supernatural. Human relationships are not so easy for her as they are for Hagar, despite Hagar's determination to control her peers.

\(^{70}\text{Op. cit., p. 304.}\)
CHAPTER IV

A Jest of God

If Hagar is responsible for her own wasteland, so is her biblical descendent Rachel (Cameron) in A Jest of God. Rachel is the inverse of Hagar, who impresses her grotesque pride on the landscape, but she too is guilty in that she allows the landscape to oppress her. A spinster school teacher, whose only creative act is a cruel joke, Rachel lacks the will to grab the golden ring as she cringes on her merry-go-round full of familiar but untouched faces. Her desolation, like Hagar's, is psychological. The wasteland is her own mind where the only possibility for self fulfilment exists in the fantasies she plays like midnight movies across the screen of her empty nights.

Hagar is larger than life and her salvation is inherent in the discovery of her own weakness. Rachel, if she is ever to find herself, must journey in the opposite direction. She must cast off her fears and self doubts in order to become a real person. It is the flabbiness of her will, the tiresomeness of her endless submission to her own inhibitions that leave her character and the novel somehow incomplete and unsatisfying. Unlike Hagar, who challenges life on her own terms, Rachel withdraws. As Hagar rapes and plunders her world with enthusiasm, Rachel and her emotional environment remain virgin. There is a negative quality to her every act. She leaves reverse footprints and, for her, tragedy is
impossible. Instead she is simply the victim of a cruel joke and her own sad imagination.

Rachel, trembling on the threshold of life, is saturated in the sombre shades of death over which Hagar, who has been through all the colours of the rainbow, is triumphant. It is the failure to integrate the possibilities and the actualities, so effectively juxtaposed in *The Stone Angel*, that leaves *A Jest of God* exactly where Rachel is, at an ambivalent beginning. She never takes on the colours of life. Mrs. Laurence is aware of this.

*A Jest of God*, as some critics have pointed out disapprovingly, is a very inturned novel. I recognize the limitations of a novel, the first person and the present tense, from one viewpoint only, but it couldn't have been done any other way, for Rachel herself is a very inturned person. She tries to break the handcuffs of her own past, but she is perceptive enough to recognize that for her no freedom from the shackledom of her ancestors can be total. Her emergence from the tomb-like atmosphere of her extended childhood is a partial defeat—or, looked at in another way, a partial victory. She is no longer so much afraid of herself as she was. She is beginning to learn the rules of survival.  

Unlike the biblical Rachel, whom God finally rewarded by lifting the curse of sterility from her womb, Rachel Cameron has known no love and has only been initiated to the fear of God and man. She will not leave the positive imprint of the earth mother, by mothering a nation who will find the Promised Land as the biblical Rachel does, and her painful post-operative plea "I am the mother now" is only a partial victory. She can only replace the ancient child in her care and become mother to herself.

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Rachel's Manawaka is a very different place than that earlier birthplace of Hagar Shipley. Impressed by the brilliance of her own self conception, Hagar regarded the prairie as an impediment to the realization of her potential. She wrongly felt it could not sustain her. Throughout The Stone Angel, Hagar and the desert environment, which is an extension of aspects of her personality, compete for ascendency. The strong psychological coloration of Hagar is balanced by a vividly described prairie. Hagar's fundamental error is inherent in her decision to abandon the struggle in the effort to escape herself and move to the city. The impressionistic quality of the description of mental and physical landscape in The Stone Angel unifies time place and character in an overwhelming experience. Rachel, on the other hand, shrinks from the technicolour grotesques of her town. She allows herself to be intimidated by every sign of life. In A Jest of God, the drought is not seasonal but permanent, in Rachel herself. Her grey-ness constitutes a withdrawal from the brilliant world Margaret Laurence creates around her. The Promised Land already seems to have been realized, physically at least, in this prairie setting. Perhaps it is too abundant for Rachel, who cannot identify her own barrenness with its apparent fertility. This world is distorted through the transparent lens of Rachel's kaleidoscope vision. Manawaka is not the traditional desert that challenged Rachel's ancestors, but an exaggerated Eden she is not equipped to populate or even destroy through sin. Gone is the grey weathered farmhouse and bleak fields of the depression. Instead, there is the defiant virility of the Kazlik's place.
The Kazlik's place is about three miles out of town, along the gravel highway where the telephone wires hum like the harps of the wind. The house is set back from the road, indistinguishable from a thousand frame framhouses planted among the poplars. The barn, though, is splendid and enormous, as newly white as an egg. At the front of the house someone, Nick's mother probably, has planted orange and yellow calendula, and blue larkspur and zinnias siff and dowdy as paper flowers.\(^\text{72}\)

In her failure to come to grips with reality, Rachel is totally alienated from her prairie and her fellow human beings. All the people who could give dimension and meaning to her life are stereotyped in her own rigid mind. As she is the only medium through which the reader experiences the town, these individuals are restricted by her vision. Mrs. Cameron is the typical selfish hypochondriac mother, Nick is the typical callous lover and Calla is the typical frustrated lesbian school teacher. Rachel saves all her compassion for herself in her frequent forays into self pity and reverie. Her alienation is realized thematically by the constant convoluted journeys of her mind. Unlike Hagar, who ignored her personal wilderness and plunged into devastating external relationships, Rachel travels inwards, an experience sometimes irritating and sometimes rewarding.

Hagar's confusion of illusion and reality exists primarily in a social context. She is frustrated by the disparity between what she is and what she imagines herself to be; the real world, manifested in the prairie which is a reflection not only of the tangled wilderness of her pride but also her magnificent capacity for life, and the imaginary world of elaborate conventions which

\(^{72}\text{Margaret Laurence, A Jest of God, p. 101.}\)
have no place in the pure Old Testament medium of the prairie. For Rachel, that confusion borders on psychosis. Illusion, for her, exists outside of human relationships. She has no self-image at all. Her world of illusion is not a mask but another schizophrenic self which moves through dreams that threaten to totally overpower reality. Rather than questing outward toward a distorted ideal self, as Hagar does, Rachel retreats to her nocturnal reveries.

In her imaginary world, Rachel is the heroine of a fairytale of nighttime fantasies that blot out her ambition to succeed in the daytime with real people. Unlike the people of Manawaka, who go to movies to escape, Rachel derives satisfaction from the celluloid world of her improbable dreams. Going to the movies is a group experience and Rachel is very much alone during her evenings. She knows that every dream detracts from the possibility of ever realizing a concreteness in the real world, but she weakly allows it to take over.

I can't. Tonight is hell on wheels again. Trite. Hell on wheels. But almostaccurate. The night feels like a gigantic ferris wheel turning in blackness very slowly. Turning once for each hour, interminably slow. And I am glued to it, or wired, like paper, like a photograph, insubstantial, unable to anchor myself, unable to stop this slow nocturnal circling.73

Rachel's exile is even more frightening than Hagar's, because she is unable to exist anywhere but in her own imagination. Hagar bravely resists death, while Rachel accepts death-in-life. Despite her vulnerability, she finds no comfort in religion. She is too

73Ibid., p. 19.
intelligent to accept the false promise. Although she has vague hopes for the future, she has no religious aspirations. There is no question of eternal life. A belief in spiritual absolutes would perhaps have provided an emotional outlet, as it does for her friend Calla, but Rachel is skeptical. If God is love and there is no love, then God is dead.

When I came back to teach in Manawaka, I told mother the first Sunday that I didn't think I'd go. She said "Why not?" I didn't say God hadn't died recently, within the last few years, but a long time ago, longer than I could remember, for I could not actually recall a time when I was alive.74

Only in the false hope of a false love is Rachel briefly able to conjure up some idea of a living God.

I don't know why a person pleads with God. If I believed, the last kind of Creator I could imagine would be a human-type being who could be reached by tears or bribed with words. Say please, Rachel, its the magic word. Mother.

Please, God, let him phone.75

The undertaker is an ambiguous and ominous figure in both The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. In Rachel's case he is more oppressive, having been her own dead father. The greatest adversary in the struggle for self realization is death. Rachel's father serves ambivalently as the giver of life and the overseer of death. The emotional result is a neutrality, death in life. The apartment over the funeral parlour with its neon lights is in effect her spiritual coffin. She and her mother are relics of a dead past, wrapped in mothballs like the nighties Mrs. Cameron is saving for her final illness. Although Margaret Laurence consis-

74 Op. cit., p. 39
tently uses biblical archetypes, names and situations, she does not respond to the spiritual immutability of the prairie. The Old Testament setting is as mutable as the characters who invade it. There is no promise of renewed life inherent in death. Death is final, secular and unpleasant.

All that remains is for someone to delete the word funeral. A nasty word, smacking of mortality. No one in Manawaka ever dies, not on this side of the tracks. We are a gathering of immortals. We pass on, through Calla's divine gates of topaz and azure, perhaps, but we do not die. Death is rude, unmannerly, not to be spoken to in the street.76

Rachel's preoccupation with death is a neurotic involution of the townspeople's tendency to avoid it or refer to it in euphemisms. Even Calla, whose name evokes a funeral flower, is associated, in Rachel's mind, with death. "Calla's mother was exceptionally fond of white lilies, and christened her only daughter after one variety of them."77

It is ironic that Rachel and the novel are most alive in the scenes in the tabernacle and funeral parlour, places she abhors for their foolishness, and hypocrisy. She sees more of herself there then in any of the mirrors she has been frantically examining for clues to her identity. "I have to pass myself again and again, and see a thing streak of a person, like a stroke of a white chalk on a blackboard." In the places she knows God is absent from, but responds to in her own complicated way, she is somehow able to communicate.

Silence. I can't stay. I can't stand it. I really can't. Beside me, the man moans gently, moans and stirs, and moans-

That voice!

Chattering crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving-

Not Calla's voice. Oh my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel.78

There is, however, no permanent release for Rachel's spirit -- through religion, sex or friendship. Finally, she realizes she must leave the dead shell of the past behind and escape. The withdrawal into self is not longer possible, for her walls are not impermeable. Always, for prairie men and women, there is the train. For some it is the umbilical cord that unites them with the rest of the world and for others, like Rachel and Hagar, it is the way out.

When I was a child the trains were all steam, and you could hear the whistle blow a long way off, carrying better in this flat land than it would have done in the mountains, the sound all prairie kids grew up with, the trainvoice that said don't stay don't stay just don't ever stay-go and keep on going, never mind where.79

However, the journey west may simply become an externalization of the countless lonely trips into her own mind. The train may move along the track or the bus along the highway, but the roads themselves connect the past to the present. There is really no way out. For Rachel, as for Hagar Shipley, and Mrs. Bentley, in As For Me and My House, the prairie can never be left behind, for it is a

part of them.

The train ironically moves Rachel out of a world she can never leave and takes Abraham, in Adele Wiseman's novel *The Sacrifice* into a landscape he will never be a part of. For the questor, the false journey, which is merely a marking of time, is but a single aspect of that process of selection which takes him or her to personal salvation. It is necessary to occasionally fail to find the way out of the labyrinth. A voyage without peril is also without significance.

Abrahams movement into the prairie landscape, which he views as the Old Testament Promised Land, is anachronistic. He is unable to progress beyond his own narrow view of history. If Rachel over-reacts to landscape, Abraham is totally unable to communicate with its realities. He is blind to the present and has a distorted archetypal view of the past which, rather than equipping him for transcendental experiences, assures him of failure as a questor in a wasteland he has not bothered to comprehend.
CHAPTER V

The Sacrifice

With its inherent romantic and sexual connotations, the train is a constant and powerful symbol in the Canadian Prairie novel. The train is energy and escape and, above all, it is the link with the outside world, past, present and future. When the present becomes unbearable, the train is memory and desire, stimulating the imagination as it regularly disturbs the quiet prairie soil, rumbling in the distance like some voice at the back of the mind. Abraham, unlike many of his peers in prairie fiction, appears to have ended his trying journey to the Promised Land, at the beginning of Adele Wiseman's novel The Sacrifice, when he abruptly decides to disembark at an unnamed city in the middle of the prairie. A dogmatic figure in a pragmatic landscape, he seems to feel instinctively that he had found the land of milk and honey. There will be no more travelling for the weary pilgrim. The train has brought Abraham and his family to peace.

Enough. With a sudden rush of indignation, as though he had been jerked awake, it came to Abraham that they had fled far enough. The thought took hold in his mind like a command. It came alive in his head and swept through him angrily, in a wave of energy, a rebellious movement of the blood. It was as simple as that. Enough.

Once he has found his New Jerusalem in Canada, Abraham begins to play his role in a ritual that brings both ecstasy and

\[80\text{Adele Wiseman, The Sacrifice, p. 3.}\]
despair, salvation and degeneration. Ironically, Abraham's journey of the soul only begins in the new land and its resolution is as ambivalent as its beginning. He never becomes a part of the landscape, as he fumbles around in the abstract world of his own imagination. The train has brought him to a certain place, but his realities are always metaphorical rather than determined by the environment. His morality and his justice are as foreign to the twentieth century as they are to the city where he has decided to stay. Like King Lear, he is a grotesque, suffering within the rigid framework of his own emotional and intellectual construct.

Through the force of his own personality, Abraham supports the inertia of his own blind dialectic "To grow, to discover, to build." The synthesis is painful and regressive, but the wheel of fire keeps turning, and at the end of the novel the cycle is still incomplete; Moses moves into his own uncertain future after the interview with his mad grandfather.

Even afterward, as he sat in the bus that rattled its way down to the city, with his hand shielding his swollen eyes from the possible curious glances of the other passengers, he could not understand exactly what had come together for him... And yet he knew that he was a different person from the boy who had gone up the hill.81

The future, for Moses, is not assured, but he is growing and discovering in a way his grandfather never could. He is the new life inherent in the sacrifice of his ancestors. In human and symbollic terms, Moses is the inheritor of the Promised Land. The past is fraught with pain, but the future, possibly because of the

81 Ibid., p. 345.
cathartic value of his grandfather's insane sacrifice, the future
is a blank page on which he is free to write his own history.

It is not the landscape itself, but the way the characters
perceive its reality that assumes significance in *The Sacrifice.*
Miss Wiseman never tells us the name of the city, even though it
is often assumed to be Winnipeg, or the last name of her strange
and powerful family. Time and place are confused in the labyrinth
of identities real and imaginary that is central to the novel
itself. Hers is a city landscape where man, instead of turning
outward to assure the survival of the body, must turn inward to
assure the survival of the soul. Environment is not the formidable
adversary of *As For Me and My House* or the distorted mirror of
*A Jest of God,* but rather an aspect of state of mind, a mélange of
time historic and mythic.

For Sarah, the new land really doesn't exist at all.
Her life ended during the pogrom in Russia and the present is a
living nightmare she walks through, dazed and uncommunicative. Although
Sarah "lives in a dream," it is a fractured dream of the past
and not a vision of the future shared with Abraham. Her preoccupa-
tion with the joys and horrors of the past make adjustment to
Abraham's ambitions for a dynasty in the new country impossible.
Like Mary, mother of Jesus, her total absorption with the death of
the son eliminates the possibility of joy in the promise of renewed
life. She is a sad counterpoint to the blind optimism of her husband,
who unwittedly "builds a crooked house" for the future generations.

Abraham does not know why he decides to end the long journey from Russia on the prairie. Presumably, their exodus was to take them to the west coast, the end of the line. His first act in the novel is one of will. He knows he is right, trusting as he always does in his own intuition regarding the will of God. Later, on the awful night of Láiah's murder, his daughter-in-law holds his arrogance up to him like a mirror.

"You thought. You and God are always thinking. Whatever is convenient for you God happens to think. Where do you keep him, this God of yours, in your coat pocket? What others think doesn't matter. As long as you-"

In his pride, Abraham attempts to fashion his relatives and his landscape into the shape of his own dreams. His obsession supresses all those aspects of reality which do not correspond to the ideal. He is overly conscious of the weight of his own name and his relationship to the biblical Abraham. Indeed, his confusion of the real and symbolic modes constitute his tragedy. The new country is a Promised Land which he approaches in terms of pre-christian rather than twentieth century values. His life is a sustained ritual against an artificial setting. He responds to the city as an Old Testament desert to be cultivated. There is no harmony with urban reality. He is a tree and he has made no allowance for the concrete sidewalks his roots must pierce.

Then, with the new day, to settle themselves gingerly on the crust of the city, perhaps someday even to send down a few roots-those roots, pre-numbed and

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shallow, of the often uprooted. But strong. Abraham felt strength surge up in him, excitement shaking the tiredness out of his body. No matter what is done to the plant, when it falls, again it will send out the tentative roots to the earth and rise upward again to the sky. The boy was young, the boy was blessed, the boy would grow.84

Isaac, the ironist, who perceives and experiences the negative pole of his father's optimism, is the most tragic figure in the conflict between past and present. He must live up to his father's ideal with the full knowledge that he has neither the energy nor the special intelligence of a messiah. A normal man, he is destroyed in the effort to be superhuman. Unfortunately, Isaac must pursue principles he knows to be futile in order to please his overwhelming father. If he were unable to perceive the disparity between illusion and reality, his struggle would not be so painful. But he must sacrifice himself with the full knowledge that his self denial will make very little difference.

The city, to Isaac, reflects the conflicts in his own mind. Penetrating the archetypal vision of his father, he sees the difference between what is and what might be in realistic terms. In the new landscape, the shadows of past and present struggle for ascendancy in his mind. "The life that he remembered wavered uncertainly forward to meet the life that he seemed about to live." He sees the land in terms of planes rather than details. The looming shapes of a static world manipulate and ultimately destroy him. He is paralyzed, literally and metaphorically, by the forces that tear at his body and his mind. Longing to become a part of the

84Ibid., p. 6.
immutable world in order to satisfy the enormous ambitions of his father, he knows that time holds him green and dying, like everyone else.

To Isaac the land seemed like a great arrested movement, petrified in time, like his memories, and the city crawled about its surface in a counterpoint of life.85

This is a portrait of Isaac himself.

The tragedy of Abraham is that, contrary to intention, he fails to grow and discover and instead of setting down in the roots of a strong tree manages only to build a crooked house for his grandson Moses. Abraham is locked in his own social and religious prejudices. In striving to live up to the prototype Abraham, he misses most of the possibilities offered by the new land. He equates past with present and refuses to accept change. His wife will not die in a hospital. In a heterogeneous community, where all men must come together to shape the future, Abraham clings to the notion that he is of "the chosen people". He is insensitive to change and to the emotional needs of the people around him, of whom he tends to think in terms of archetypes. Everyone must live up to the full potential of his name. The human possibility is forsaken in favour of the divine. Abraham, assumes his superiority over moral and civil law, thus making success in natural terms impossible. His acts, which he considers to be sacred, are actually a desacration.

Miss Wiseman's response to the prairie, although superficially Jewish, is fundamentally analogous to that of most other

writers of prairie fiction. It is the landscape of the Old Testament, harsh and terrifying at times but full of the possibility of renewal. Christian and Jew alike respond to the traditional setting with a stirring about the roots. Each author, in his own way, is rewriting the book of Genesis.

The pioneers who migrated to the new biblical wilderness were motivated by a faith in their ability to rebuild a new world on the ruins of the old dead one left behind. Abraham, however, is unable to cut off the dead limbs. The past is a terrible burden on the future. In Miss Wiseman's novel, myth and symbol complicate and sometimes strangle reality. It is not enough to draw on the past. Tears evoked by the memory of suffering cannot sustain new life. Abraham fails to see this.

When Abraham emerged in some alarm from the bedroom, Mrs. Plopler at once became terribly brave. She spoke touchingly to them of the new world, new friends, a new life... Perhaps in some incomprehensible woman's way that draws courage from tears, she might be able to help his wife to accept her fate.86

The novel operates, with varying degrees of success, on several temporal levels. Personal mythology, which for Abraham and his family tells the story of a long Odyssey of suffering, is juxtaposed with immediate reality and the rigid framework of religious myth. Abraham would fashion their lives as objective correlatives for the biblical story, frozen in time. Unfortunately, he is mortal and the disparity between his own circumstances and those of the father of Israel is too great to overcome through the

assumption of a false priesthood. The weakness of The Sacrifice is Abraham's weakness. Too often, the goal becomes more important than the journey and the characters become ivory pawns in an impossible game of chess. The human being is locked in the symbol.

No suffering is more poignant than that of Isaac, who realizes he cannot escape punishment in the deadly game of illusion and reality. Left alone, he could build a hopeful future upon the dead past, but his father's hopes and prejudices strangle the possibility. Because he is caught between hope and despair, Isaac is rendered impotent. He embarks on the heroic act of saving the Torah with the full knowledge that his sacrifice will make very little difference. Caught between the past and the future, he is the victim of the counterpoint of realities. Pain and suffering have no joy for him because he knows his heroism is false. He has been sacrificed to a Jewish past. Far better to live in a non-denominational future.

"Yes", said Abraham softly to his grandson, "It's hard to be a Jew."

"Harder still," said Isaac as softly, "to be a human being." 87

Isaac wants to succeed as a human being, for his family. His private quest is limited to mutable time. However, he must respond to the false symbolic quest outlined by his father. In his dreams, the past restrains him in a plastic bubble. Like a child struggling to be born, he resists it in a desperate bid for freedom.

Sometimes, in a burst of energy and desire, he pushed out and outward, expanding his sphere, stretching his limbs beyond any length that they had ever achieved, so that the tips of his toes and fingers alone touched its surface, and he poised in the ecstasy of effort, certain that one final burst of strength and will would stretch the bubble to its limits and he would burst through.

But he could stretch no farther. At the tips of his body it waited, firm and resilient, cruelly patient, ready to spring in upon him and crush him the moment he could hold back no longer. The pain in his arms and legs was unberable...

But in spite of the pain and the fear and the danger there was always the feeling that someday, perhaps, a superhuman movement would release him, and he endured, waiting for that moment. Isaac is trapped. There are too many demands and he hasn't the strength to be reborn. The former life has weakened his will to overcome the negative forces of degeneration. In saving the Torah, he succumbs to the past.

The analogy between the butcher Abraham and the father of Israel are at times contrived but somehow acceptable in that they explain if they do not justify the immigrant's obsession. He errs in equating self with symbol, but it is entirely possible within the framework of his life. He dreams of uniting himself with God and that dream is a form of madness, eliminating rational behaviour outside the framework of ritual. He views his illegitimate sacrifice as the supreme moment of union between man and God.

God himself is bound at that moment, for it is the point of mutual surrender, the one thing he can't resist, a faith so absolute. You are right when you say that it is like a circle - the completed circle,

when the maker of the sacrifice and the sacrifice himself and the Demander who is the Receiver of the sacrifice are poised together, and life flows into eternity, and for a moment all three are as one.89

Abraham is a false priest and his sacrifices, Isaac and Laiah, for they are both his victims, are as anti-God as the ritual slaughter he performed as a young apprentice in Russia. Isaac realizes the human error in the attempt to justify the ways of man in terms of divine will. In his analysis of the original Abraham, he unknowingly condemns the later behaviour of his own father.

"But who's to say," Isaac began when he and Ruth were alone and they could hear sounds of water splashing in the bathroom, "that it's not just an excitement of the imagination? Killing children is a brutal and wasteful habit, as Abraham realized, just as any killing is. So, being a clever man, he evolved a method of convincing his people in terms that would excite their imaginations and make them take notice.90

Abraham had hoped to transcend mutable reality and experience revelation through sacrifice. However, instead of finding truth, he has simply penetrated the awful reality of madness. Too late, he realizes the value of life, the healing power of love.

The ritual trance that Abraham works himself into before the terrible murder of Laiah is like the controlled hysteria of nazi Germany. He must find a scapegoat for his own fears and guilt and that sacrificial lamb must be transformed to fit the symbolic mode. He must cease to be a man and she a woman. They become in his compulsion sacrificial priest and victim. Within

his own frame of reference, Abraham's act is justified, so long as
he is in the power of his self-hypnosis.

Laiah is the animal who has been sent by God to replace
the son Isaac. He has always perceived her in animalistic terms.
Of her need for love and comfort, he is unaware. Although a sensual
woman, she has born no children, contrary to Abraham's interpretation
of the laws of nature. She is the false promise of a false spring.
"It disturbed him to watch a grown woman, filled out with middle
years, trying still to move to the rhythms of spring. Behind it
there was something frightening." 91

She becomes for him the embodiment of evil, the denial
of life. He is infuriated by her promise of sex without children.
Instead of pitying her, she becomes the obvious sacrificial victim.

She was like a great overripe fruit without seed,
which hung now, long past its season, on the bough.
How many generations had been denied in her womb.
What festered there instead? She had denied creation,
and to deny is to annihilate. 92

It is ironic that in the scene of Laiah's ritual murder,
when Abraham's delusion is at its peak, symbol and reality are
exquisitely fused in the tense counterpoint of sexual and religious
passion. The conflicting motifs of life and death, love and hate
are built to a passionate crescendo as Laiah's sexual desire and
Abraham's insane ritual reach a climax. Real and false ideal are
layered to form an impossible conclusion. Abraham is hypnotized
by his rage. "Looking at her then, he was lifted out of time and
place. Lifetimes swept by and he stood dreaming on a platform,

apart, gazing at her with fear growing in his heart, and somewhere his Master, waiting." 93 In human terms, Laiah's death is grotesque. Symbolically, for Abraham, still in the grips of his compulsion, it is sublime. Later, when the spell is broken, he is reduced again to the mortal world and he feels the terrible impact of his crime.

Abraham's retreat into limbo, following the murder, despite its social ramifications, frees his grandson from the shackles of the past. Although Laiah's death is a terrible waste, it has motivated a regenerative phase of the cycle; reviving once again the prospect of the Promised Land. Isaac's journey led him to death and Abraham's to madness, but there is still the boy. In death is the implicit promise of continuing life. Moses friend Aaron brings up the possibility of the new country, Israel. Moses knows he is his own country. Experience has taught him the foolishness of blind optimism. He will not make the same mistakes his grandfather did.

"Well's start a new country," Aaron went on finally, "start new, clean, get rid of all the dirt-" "I don't know", said Moses. "We've had a country before. Remember what happened..." 94

The fundamental note of optimism at the conclusion of The Sacrifice, as in Who Has Seen the Wind, As For Me and My House and The Stone Angel, is the inherent promise of a new generation. The weary pilgrim must die, just as the crops of the spring are bound to be harvested in the fall, but the new generation will carry on the quest for the grail. The ascendant phase of the sun triumphs in spite of past failures.

CHAPTER VI

The Messianic Motif

In his effort to reconcile his notions of real and ideal worlds, the artist, who knows himself and his peers as imperfect and fallible, often feels compelled to create the myth of the superman, or messiah, who has the capacity to help his fellows overcome the human condition. In the prairie novel, where the complications of city and civilization are minimized in a confrontation with the same elements that baffled our ancestors, the literary artist resorts to allegorical patterns almost as ancient as the land itself. The metaphorical struggle of a new generation is expressed in terms of historical archetypes. It is inevitable that the promise of the Old Testament should be realized in the person of the prophet promised to lead the way into the maze of the Promised Land and, ultimately, beyond it to the abstraction of everlasting life. The emphasis in the novels we have studied so far is on the first phase, the era of Genesis. The first reaction to the bitter but rewarding prairie is a reminder of the harshness of the Old Testament. Man learns to struggle against the forces of decadence inherent in the prairie and in his own being. However, as the communities grow, as evidenced particularly in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, *As For Me and My House* and *The Sacrifice*, the need for the lesson of compassion and symbolic sacrifice and redemption becomes acute.

Like Christ in the wilderness, Hagar was tempted by pride. However, despite the sacramental image patterns in *The*
Stone Angel, her victory is personal and limited. In Who Has Seen the Wind, Brian O'Connell is still waiting for the Redeemer who will show him the meaning of God. The regenerative possibility is fragmented into aspects of experience rather than concrete symbolism. Hagar, Brian and the Bentleys are left alone to sort out the meaning of their ambivalent lives. Salvation is a possibility which is suggested but never realized.

Faith or desperation must eventually lead either to cynicism or to the realization of hope in a symbol of infinite possibility. It is natural that the messiah, promised to the Jews and produced to the satisfaction of Christians, should eventually enter into the prairie landscape, enriching the soil with the lessons of love and compassion. The novel then moves from the Old Testament to the New Testament and the circle uniting man and God is at least temporarily completed.

The prairie is then transformed entirely into archetype, approaching the timelessness of Gwendolyn MacEwen's Julian the Magician, where the Messiah/magician exists in the limbo of imagination offering the possibility of the state of grace for all men in all places if they are willing to endure and overcome.

It is technique, the vital presentation of the real as representative or adversary of the ideal, that saves the good novel from the tedium of conventional allegory. Miss MacEwen's book succeeds because of the psychological accuracy of characterization, just as The Stone Angel transcends cliché because of the overwhelming humanity of its central character, Hagar Shipley. Of all the novels studied, Adele Wiseman's The Sacrifice is least
successful in shrugging off the excessive weight of archetypes. Her characters are imprisoned in the symbols and only occasionally get free. This is the dilemma of the writer and the problem of the fictional people who populate her landscape.

The problems inherent in the symbolic response to the prairie landscape are universal. Man is always faced with the heavy burden of time. What is the value of personal and cultural history? How much of the degenerative cycle should be salvaged and utilized in the regenerative phase? This dilemma is particularly acute in a new country, where the possibility of a fresh start is juxtaposed with memory and the knowledge that the land itself will never really change. Somehow, a balance between past and present must be achieved if the individual or the work of art is going to be relevant.

George Elliott's *The Kissing Man*, a collection of short stories bound by the episodic development of setting and characters in the manner of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*, is unevenly successful in this respect. Sometimes Elliott's symbols and grotesques are intrusive, but more often they provide a rich variety in texture for the homespun fabric of life in a prairie town. Elliott is careful to keep one eye on the immediate and the other on the universal. He evokes biblical analogues through the symbolic nomenclature of his characters, but, at the same time, assures them of their individuality. Similarly, his language is biblical and at the same time natural to the setting. It has the simple force of truth.

In the first story, "An Act of Piety", Elliott establishes the fertile agrarian mood of the town. The grandfather, Mayhew Salkald,
is likened to a "Bible patriarch" whose faith in generation has not been organized beyond natural religion. "You said you had a religion of your own". The Salkalds are good people but the suspicion and envy and greed that eventually lead to the fall are anticipated in their negative reaction to the new people who move in next door. History is beginning to repeat itself in the pioneer community. The malignant condition of bigotry, so ruthlessly described in Earle Birney's poem "Anglo-Saxon Street", is beginning to take hold. Man seems doomed to continue making the same mistakes; but there is always another chance.

Mayhew has a great affinity for the land and he knows instinctively that "the truth of life and death (were) not the same". The story echoes the pattern of Genesis. Mayhew is both God creating the world and Abraham siring the men who will populate it. His creed is the practical wisdom of the pioneer and its articulation ("You knew about permanence the day you moved into your own property") unites him with the land. The young boy, Honey, learning the facts of life and death from his grandfather, feels the weight of his legacy. "The past was in him, never to be forgotten nor ignored. But he didn't know whether he was to forgive. He wanted only to keep what was good and pass it on." 

The second story "When Jacob was a Boy", deals with the themes of sexuality and brotherhood that are inherent in every life journey although the obvious antecedent is that of Jacob and Esau,

95 George Elliot, The Kissing Man, p. 10.
96 Ibid., p. 10.
grandsons of Abraham. Cruelty and death are the grotesques woven into this simple allegory. Throughout the stories, the individuals hover between the extremes of love and hate as the seasons and generations change, modifying all in the complex relationship of man and environment which is reality. Life, time immediate and historical, death, winter and summer are superimposed on one another to give a colourfull kaleidoscope vision of life in a prairie town, or anywhere for that matter.

"The Kissing Man" is the physical and emotional centre of the book. He is explicitly the saviour and, of necessity, an outsider. In the five stories which make up the first half of the collection, the problems, the sorrows and the joys, of the townspeople are articulated. They are the people who carved out the wilderness. With the kissing man comes a new phase, the development of social responsibility. In all the stories which follow, the motif of the kissing man is continued in the unselfish acts of a series of existential characters; the old man under the tree, the man who lived out loud, Johnson Mender, Bertram Sunbird, and the grinder man. All are foreigners. They come from nowhere and they disappear again without a trace except for the impression they leave on the souls of the inhabitants of the town. The simple ritual of their charity somehow motivates a positive response in the hearts of those they touch which takes the dialectic one step closer to the state of grace.

Somewhere in the genesis of the land comes the need for an intermediary between man and God. The pulse of the earth has been confused by the complexities of mutable life. Somehow the truths which are manifested in a direct relationship with the earth
must be articulated and organized. Words become the medium of understanding, a subjective response must be explained in terms of objective truth. There must be some connection between the real and the ideal, life temporal and life external. A man is bound by his own weakness to fail in this spiritual mission. His quest must be transformed into symbolic terms and his reality must be transformed into some ideal being, even though it is the product of his own imagination, who has the power to eradicate the errors and show the way to better understanding.

The kissing man, who as an unknown has the slightly bizarre quality of irrationality, or at least the strangeness of another reality, is such a man. Like Christ, he is the mysterious and misunderstood giver. He has the ability to perceive in the tangled wilderness of man and nature, the proper medium for understanding. His embraces become a sacrament, elevating the lives of the wretched, who have need.

Who lived once, and was a person to love, now is a wisp of loneliness. Why is it that order of living, loving and loneliness? Why do I see it wherever I go? I dream of taking you, Miss Corvill, and loving you body with my eyes, touching you, making you cry from shame until the shame is out of you, making you cry then for that, and giving it, giving it all the way no man ever did. It's the beginning. The beginning of life and love. And it's the end. The end of loneliness that leaves you dust. 98

Man has always shown a need for inspiration by those real and imaginary individuals who are able to transcend selfishness and illuminate the path to wisdom and goodness which becomes tangled over in the dark nights which obscure the light. Sometimes the quest is too painful, too difficult to undertake without guidance.

The expression of this need isn't peculiar to prairie fiction, but due to the special circumstances provided by a unique landscape with its obvious symbolic potential, it becomes more obvious.

An Australian novelist who demonstrates this phenomenon rather well is Randolph Stow, whose response to an environment similar to the Canadian prairie is typical in mode but exceptional in its successful handling of the motifs we have followed. The best of Mr. Stow's novels to date is *Tourmaline*, which reconciles the real and symbolic modes in a lyrical tribute to man's will to overcome.

*Tourmaline*, the static desert mining town, is caught in the life denying stasis of limbo, somewhere between heaven and hell. It is a veritable wasteland and the suffering is real, but somehow hope persists. Its inhabitants, caught in the cycle of time, wait for the way out, for the prophet to lead them out of the wilderness, since they lack the energy to change the inertia which afflicts the individual and the environment. They seize on the opportunity to resurrect the town and their lost vitality. Michael Random, the water-diviner, like Julian the magician and the kissing man, is an outsider with the apparent power to heal. Water is the medium which binds the physical and metaphysical landscapes and Michael claims to have the power to find it. Body and soul thirst for the relief of the sacrament. Water, real and symbolic, will restore life. The body and the spirit ("The sky is the garden of Tourmaline") will grow.

Apart from Tom Spring, the elder Speed and the Law there is little doubt among the townspeople that Michael is the prophet,
"But he had been far, so far, in the country never mapped, on the border lands of death. He had been where Kestrel had not, where none of us had ever been. And he brought news."  

He is the catalyst which activates their optimism, "The desert'll blossom", but both Michael and the townspeople err in forgetting that Michael is too human and that his divinity is a posture of pride. In "The Testament of Tourmaline", Stow makes it very clear that man, even Michael, is the most dispensable aspect of landscape,

The loved land will not pass away  
World has no life but transformation  
Nothing made selfless can decay  
The loved land will not pass away  
The grown man will not pass away  
Body is land in permutation  
Tireless within the fountains play  
The grown man will not pass away.

Michael, in his selfishness, will decay. He is the angel of light ("'And he,' she said, 'ah, full of light!'") and pride is his downfall. Eventually, he is associated with the fire of hell and not the "burning ice cold purity of God". The first ironic step in Michael's descent into hell is his discovery of gold instead of water. He confuses his special powers, illustrated in the discovery of gold and the arm wrestling match, with the privileges of a plenipotentiary from God:

I slapped my palm on the table, and asked (too loudly, but I was unnerved by him) 'Who are you?'  
'A voice,' he said, slightly smiling, with a kind of holy complacency. 'A voice in the wilderness.'  
'Ah, this is old stuff.'  
'Well, nothing's new under the sun.'  
'Then what's your business?'  
'To speak for God,' he said softly. 'Because

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99 Randolph Stow, Tourmaline, p. 15. As an outsider, Michael can be compared with the fisher king who is identified with the Divine principle of Life and fertility.

he spoke to me, in the wilderness. Now I'm his mouthpiece.101

Because of the ambivalence of Michael's role in the static landscape, Tourmaline, like Horizon, is neither paradise lost nor paradise regained. There is always the past to contend with and the future is never assured. However, Deborah will have a child and that hope triumphs over the death of Tom Spring, breaking the degenerative cycle. This happens without Michael, who is, in many ways, a false prophet. Satan eventually gains ascendancy over Michael ("Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid."). His organization of the town is reminiscent of the council of hell. When Michael achieves power, biblical cadence gives say to the rhetoric of Milton:

We met in the street around the war memorial, and no one was missing but Tom, Dave Speed and Jimmy Bogada-- and, as expected, the diviner. Every remaining man in Tourmaline had come. I will call the roll. Because they are the sons of Tourmaline, that I love to count, as a miser counts his hoard. Rock was there, with Jack Speed, and Byrne as his lieutenants.102

Michael cannot save the town, but he can and does remind the people that they can be the instruments of their own salvation. He is also the reminder of the infinite possibility ("The colours of time blind the eye to timeless colours")103 and as such serves a positive function. Tourmaline, like many of the towns brought to

101Randolph Stow, Tourmaline, p. 130. The imagery of Ecclesiastes is as appropriate to this environment as it appears to be to the Canadian prairie.

102Ibid., p. 150.

103An image which recalls Shelley's famous platonic statement in "Adonais":

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity.
life in Canadian prairie fiction, is both an island and a scheduled part of the cosmos. The problems which affect its inhabitants are universal, even though the particular demands of environment control the response of the artist or the individual to them. Because of his heritage and perhaps the timelessness of the land, man appears to react in a predictable way to the actual and symbolic properties of the desert or prairie, ("I say we have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down.") Tourmaline, Australia and Horizon, Canada, inspire the very human desire to improve and overcome.

Randolph Stow's world is not really very different from that of Sinclair Ross or W.O. Mitchell. Perceptions may alter with the individual, but, given the conditions of the Wasted Land, historical or contemporary, the artist will respond in the medium of a shared language of conventional archetypes. Ezekiel's desert, Eliot's city, Stow's mining town, Mitchell's prairie and Coleridge's ocean all inspire, in spite of the obvious power of decadence, a romantic quest for perfection which is controlled by personal and cultural myths ultimately determined by the patterned rhythms of nature.

In his discussion of the "Australian legend" Russel Ward arrives at a definition of nationality which is universally applicable:

National character is not, as was once held, something inherited, nor is it, on the other hand, entirely a figment of the imagination of poets; publicists and other feckless dreamers. It is rather a peoples idea of itself and this stereotype, though often absurdly romanticized and exaggerated, is always connected with reality in two ways. It springs largely from a peoples past experiences, and it often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they ought "typically" to behave.

The quest, and its subordinate messianic motif know no national boundaries, just as the seasons follow their relentless course, bringing life and death, everywhere. It is simply point of view which alters from man to man, artist to artist. The white light, which is truth, is a combination of many colours all contributing different aspects of reality to a shared absolute.

CONCLUSION

The successful questor learns that he must live in harmony with the rhythms of nature or suffer the consequences of physical and spiritual alienation. This is the lesson of Odysseus, Sir Gawain and the ancient mariner, one modern urban man in his intellectual arrogance must heed quickly or face extinction. The state of grace is available only to the man or woman who recognizes and accepts the limitations of time and place in struggling to create a better world. The desire for perfection should not be limited but encouraged by an awareness of human fallibility.

Mrs. Bentley, in *As For Me and My House*, Hagar Shipley, in *The Stone Angel*, and Abraham in *The Sacrifice*, all fail or succeed as human beings relative to the degree to which they adapt to landscape. Abraham is tragic because he is totally unwilling to communicate with his environment, Mrs. Bentley remains in limbo as she weighs the relative advantages of town and country, love and hate, and Hagar, wanderer in her own wasteland, only creates the medium for salvation when she recognizes the futility of her own pride. Like it or not, we are all prisoners in the cycle of time which manifests itself in the extreme seasonal changes of prairie life, but some have the power and desire "to sing in their chains like the sea." The lesson of *Ecclesiastes* is repeated over and over in prairie fiction as the artist warns the potential questor that only the fool, overcome by his own smallness in a great overwhelming universe, "folds his hands..."
eats his own flesh."  

For some prairie inhabitants, Hagar Shipley and Abe Spalding in Frederick P. Grove's *Fruits of the Earth*, a novel which is more social document than flesh and blood communion with the soil, reconciliation with mutable life, is all the religion they need. For others the most important inherent factor in the quest is the need to relate the God within to the God without, the natural with the supernatural. If God manifests himself in nature, then it is through concert with the earth that the questor can know God, or at least comprehend in part the eternal mysteries. The pioneers, who brought with them to the prairies the concepts of organized religion derived from the original Promised Lands, struggled to unite the old notions with the new experiences. The disparity between real and ideal can be interpreted in human and divine terms. On one hand, there is the farmer, Abe Spalding in *Fruits of the Earth* or Caleb Gare in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, whose ideal is primarily materialistic -- the wilderness must be cultivated. Then there is the spiritual man, often incorporated in the same being, who ponders the wilderness of the mind in order to capture and identify elusive truths.

Once the immediate demands of environment are satisfied, the problems of living in harmony with landscape expand to a larger need for communion with God. Man himself becomes the medium

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106 The reference is explicitly made in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, p. 41, and W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, with reference to Old Wong, who lacked the strength necessary to oppose the prejudices of the town.
through which the temporal and eternal mysteries are reconciled. The artist has a responsibility to interpret what he knows in terms of lesser and greater realities. An image repeated too many times in Canadian fiction to ignore perhaps best expresses the need to relate human and divine experience. The childhood game of "angels in the snow" unites physical and metaphysical realities, as silently and poignantly, the questor leaves his footprint, compelling with his impression the dialectic of progress.

Hagar Shipley dreams of special powers:

> My bed is cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow, and they would spread their arms and sweep them down to their sides, and when they rose, there would be an outline of an angel with spread wings. The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard, and freeze.

Every angel in the snow is different from all the others which come before or after it. Human interference with the medium, snow, is a shared property, but the impression varies. Some are more beautiful than others. Just as the common game in a common medium produces a heterogeneous quality of angel, the landscape evokes varying responses in the questor, which is point of view. The footsteps of Brian O' Connal in *Who Has Seen The Wind*, are very different from those of Gander in Robert Stead's *Grain*, or Gil Reardon in Edward McCourt's *Music at the Close*. Whichever route the pilgrim choses to follow, however, he is still bound to the quality of his environment and the traditions which have shaped his

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107 In Leonard Cohen's *Favourite Game*, Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House*, and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*.

personal mythology.

In tracing the development of basic environmental responses into literary motifs, Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, explicates many of the motifs which are manifested in the major and minor fiction of the Canadian prairie. There is a shared language of conventional archetypes which the prairie pioneer shares with the questor everywhere.

The pattern of development in the prairie novel appears to be from particular to general, real to ideal. Just as landscape commanded the first attention of primitive man, it demands description by the artist who is then free to draw his own conclusions. Fiction and non-fiction writers begin by describing a prairie so similar it would be monotonous without the rich connotations of human response to unknown challenge. The country painted by Bruce Hutchison in *Unknown Country*, a non-fiction work, corresponds to the landscape of novelists Sinclair Ross, W.O. Mitchell, Margaret Laurence, Robert J. Stead and Martha Ostenso only as lowest common denominator.

The quality of description varies and it is on the treatment of reality, human and environmental that most prairie fiction will stand or fall. Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* is a brilliant failure because the weakness of its major character is the weakness of the novel. For Abraham and for Miss Wiseman, the angel in the snow is too contrived, too much under the control of the archetype. There is little vitality in the symbol. For different reasons, Raymond Knister's novel *White Narcissus* fails to achieve sublimity. Knister, an imagist poet who died, perhaps too young to achieve the fullest potential of his promise, is capable of breathtaking natural
description, but his human beings are frozen and inarticulate.

The wind was dying before the sunset, but had chilled, turning up the undersides of leaves. Trees shivered under a dulled sky. The evening, muted by wind and cold, given a sullen swiftness of animation, mated the feeling of Richard Milne. After a week of horrid weather in which the very sky seemed to melt, rain should have come to sweeten the smell of ripening grain and whitened clods. But first this dry cold, in which trees writhed blanching, while now and again a cricket chirping up fitfully made still greater the removal from the sultry quietude proper to the time and season.

It may be significant that Knister, who had a speech impediment, and Frederick Grove, who was deaf, both had difficulty developing an easy relationship between man and man, man and landscape. The music, both dissonant and harmonious, of environment must be heard and interpreted. Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross are perhaps better writers because they have a fine ear for the subtleties which provide variation on a common theme.

Patricia Barclay, in the article "Regionalism and the writer", which appeared in Canadian Literature No. 14 (Autumn 1962), describes the sense of place which the artist must translate into significant universal truths.

The sense of environment, vast, challenging and relatively unexplored still dominates the Canadian consciousness. And a panoramic view of the history of our arts could aptly be depicted in a series of bas-reliefs in which the figures are seen gradually emerging from, yet still supported by their background. The greatest artists stand freest... they have resisted their surrounding enough to use them for their own ends; to use them in the creation of universal statements, true not just for one man,
region or nation, but for all men... To the truly
gifted artist, the particular character of his
environment is secondary; it is the use he makes
of it that counts.110

The problems of contending with a sense of identity within
vast immutable landscape are shared by the artist with every individual
who, left alone with nature, struggles to articulate the individuality
of self. The philosophical concerns of the prairie writer, often
related to his own personal quest as artist, are expressed by the
inhabitants of his prairie. Mark Jordan, innocent conductor of the
tensions of Martha Ostenso's almost Lawrentian111 novel _Wild Geese_,
articulates the relationship between man and nature in his discussion
of the North:

That's a country for you. If there's a God,
I imagine that's where he sits and does his thinking.
The silence is awful. You feel immense things going
on, invisibly, there is that eternal skylight and
darkness -- the endless plains of snow -- a few fir
trees, maybe a hill or a frozen stream. And the
human beings are like totems -- figures of wood with
mysterious legends upon them that you can never make
out. The austerity of nature reduces the outward
expression in life, simply, I think, because there
is not such an abundance of natural objects for the
spirit to react to. We are, after all, only a mirror
of our environment. Life here at Oeland, even, may
seem a negation but its only a reflection from so
few exterior natural objects that it has the semblance
of negation. These people are thrown inward upon them­selves, their passions stored up, they are intensified
figures of life with no outward expression -- no re­
leasing gesture.112

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110Patricia Barclay, "Regionalism and the Writer," _Canadian

111Ostenso's sexual honesty and treatment of female characters,
particularly Judith Gare, who struggles valiantly against the conventional
notions of femininity, is very much like D.H. Lawrence. The terrible
psychological tensions which exist between men and women, and the natural
religion, which has its lessons for man, are also Lawrentian.

112Martha Ostenso, _Wild Geese_, p. 78.
Heaven and earth are the polarities which distract the prairie inhabitant from the irregularities of existence between. Despite the hardships it offers, the soil is still the source of life. "It was no small thing to be on intimate terms with the earth itself, no ignoble life that was dedicated, however blindly, to the nourishing of life." Even the attractions of urban life, the superficial comforts of the city, which drew many of the second and third generation prairie inhabitants away from the country, cannot complete with the magnetism of the soil and its truths. Hagar Shipley, in The Stone Angel, learns too late her need of the earth from which she sprung, just as Richard Milne recognizes the attractions of the early life which he as forsaken for a career as an artist in the city. "... he knew that he could never be freed from the hold of the soil, however far from it he had travelled, though he were never to be called back by itself, but by a forfeit of love which in final desperation he had come to redeem or tear from its roots forever." 

The tension between city and town, the natural patterns of rustic life and the synthetic order of civilization is a motif which is carried through most prairie fiction. Abe Spalding, in Fruits of the Earth, knows he has failed when his children move from the farm. Caleb Gare, in Wild Geese, even in his psychotic state, knows that to be cut off from the land is to be dead. Often the questor moves toward the city, as does Richard Milne, in White

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113 Edward McCourt, Music at the Close, p. 132.
114 Raymond Knister, White Narcissus, p. 21.
Narcissus or Hagar Shipley, in *The Stone Angel*, but he, or she, inevitably returns to the prairie for nourishment. Richard Milne had begun to write, and it was comparatively late that he had obeyed that questing spirit which is the heritage of youth. Well, he had gone into the world and done all that he had dreamed of doing, and he had returned frequently enough with the one purpose, to the one being which could call him back, and still the land was the same, with a sorrowful sameness.115

The cities and towns, with their false-fronted building and hard concrete, are an aberration in the unbroken line of prairie. They are a disturbance of the land and the values it represents. In his travelogue *The Road Across Canada*, Edward McCourt reacts typically to the city:

> If, however, you feel at home in the middle of vast empty spaces -- and some people like myself do -- you will resent Regina. And every other prairie city. They are alien eruptions on the face of nature, they disturb the harmony of a world in which the steel - and - glass ant-hills of modern man are an impertinence. 116

Mrs. Bentley, in *As For Me and My House*, recognizes the malignant evil of the prairie town and yet she perseveres in her belief in the city. It is her tragic inability to distinguish between the false hope of the bookstore and the real hope of Judith, who draws her to the land in their walks and finally in her sacrifice, that leaves the novel unresolved. When Isaac, in *The Sacrifice*, describes his city, he articulates the dilemma which not only ruins his father but is a universal problem of modern man. "To Isaac the land seemed like a great arrested movement, petrified in time,  

115Ibid., p. 24.  
116Edward McCourt, *The Road Across Canada*, p. 147.
like his memories, and the city crawled about its surface in a
counterpoint of life."\(^{117}\)

The train, which often carries the pilgrim away from the
prairie to the cities as well as into it, is an ambivalent symbol
in prairie literature. Symbolically, it corresponds to the
traditional vehicles of quest literature, the horse and the sailing
vessel. However, it is also associated with the mysterious and
frightening power of modern technology; Abe Spalding's daughter
Frances in *Fruits of the Earth*, who is a victim of the city and
modern values, is associated with the evil power of the train. The
train is innocence and in this capacity is often associated with the
false dream, and lost innocence, as it thrusts itself across the
prairie, male and arrogant, to the city. Judith and Philip Bentley
in *As For Me and My House* long for the romantic escape to a better
world that is promised by the train. This hope is shared by Margaret
Laurence's Hagar Shipley and Rachel Cameron, who long to communicate
with the outside world, believing it will hold the key to the solution
of their problems. The response of Judith Gare, the prisoner of her
father, the farm and anachronistic concepts of femininity, is typical:

Judith had never seen a train. Neither had Ellen
or Martin, although they had been at the riding many
times. They had seen flat cars standing on the tracks.
But never a train. It must be marvellously free riding
on a train. Like a Magic Carpet she remembered about
when she was a child at school. Going somewhere -- away
to another place. Just away -- that was enough. \(^{118}\)

The quest penetrates every level of reality. It is the
Exodus to the promised Land and the escape from it when the physical

\(^{117}\) Adele Wiseman; *The Sacrifice*, p. 13.

and emotional demands of landscape become overwhelming. It is a physical struggle against the wasteland of drought and a spiritual struggle against the desert of the mind. Every journey, even the migratory expedition of Fred Bodsworth's birds in *Last of the Curlews*, is the record of a fight for survival. The bird, romantic and religious symbol of freedom and inspiration, traces a pattern against the prairie sky, reminding the earth bound of the promise of eternity.

Far overhead in the night sky sounded the honking of the wild geese, going south now ... a remote, trailing shadow ... a magnificent seeking through solitude ... an endless quest...\(^{119}\)

The idealism, which survives in spite of adversity and inspires the pilgrim, of the pioneer is a counterpoint in the prairie novel to the horrors of depression, drought, spiritual decadence and the faint but persistent beating of drums in faraway wars. Few of the fictional characters are Byronic heroes, but most have at the core of their being a romantic desire to persist, faith in something better.

"It was a long time ago," Neil agreed, "But I remember telling you that night that you were the kind of guy wouldn't live without believing in something. You had to have a faith."

"Well?"

"Well, seems you've found it."

Gil did not say anything for a while. He finished putting away the dishes, then sat down at the table and rolled a cigarette. "Maybe you're right," he said slowly. "And its the finest faith there is faith in mankind."

Neil opened his eyes. "Maybe", he said. "But a mighty hard one to hand on to."\(^{120}\)

\(^{119}\)Ibid., p. 239.

\(^{120}\)Edward McCourt, *Music at the Close*, p. 156.
Faith often means a fundamentalist religion that can be translated into fear. Prejudices resulting from a dogmatic moral code are woven into a motif of cruelty which pervades much prairie fiction. The novels are sprinkled with pariahs, who, because of birth or the breaking of rigid social codes, are sacrificed to satisfy the inflexible puritanical demand for perfection. Hypocrisy in the name of God is the most frustrating aspect of that cruelty.

The desire to relate the unknown to the known in terms of faith gives mystical properties to the various aspects of landscape. The wind, in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, *Music at the Close* and *As For Me and My House* is associated with divine music and a God who is alternately fierce and benevolent. Rain is relief for the crops, "Rain, the first love of every farmer, the bride of every dry, thirsty field, the mother of every crop that grows!" and a grim reminder of the first flood.

The same impulse that equates environment with aspects of Godhead, inspires the symbolic naming of human beings. Prairie literature is permeated with Abrahams, Sarahs, and Ruths who will make out of the desert a Promised Land. Inherent, though, in the Old Testament landscape, is the new literary tradition. The problems of the twentieth century, synchronized with tradition by scholars like Jessie Weston and writers like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway, are very much a part of the general concern of the prairie writer. He may describe the immediate, but he is ultimately concerned with the universal.

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121 Robert J.C. Stead, *Grain*, p. 79.
Typical of the symbiosis of traditional and contemporary motifs is Edward McCourt's treatment of the "prophet" Bill Aberhart in *Music at the Close*. The same prairie that produced Riel produced the bible thumping social creditor, who, like Michael Random in Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline*, promises salvation but is tainted with the principles of materialism. The wanderers in the desert are too eager to grab at the messiah who will lead them to the Promised Land.

Neil did not hear very much of what William Aberhart said. He was too much preoccupied with the spectacle that he was witnessing the spectacle of a people gripped by something approaching hysteria in the presence of the prophet of a new age. But in Bible Bill Aberhart, the man with the pale expressionless face and the sleepy eyes, they saw leadership — they saw the prospective annihilation of whatever had been responsible for their frustration, and they were prepared to follow him with a kind of desperate trust in the wisdom and the strength of the prophet because they no longer trusted their own.122

The questor is no innocent, the path is fraught with irony and the shape and meaning of the grail is uncertain, but he perseveres, believing in the infinite possibilities that have inspired every wanderer since the beginning of time. The prairie, where intercourse between man and God is relatively free from the complications of thousands of years of civilization, is an ideal medium for the search for truth. The prairie writer has responded to the stimulus of environment. He is obviously concerned with the immediate but it is the truth that lies underneath or beyond which grips his imagination. W.O Mitchell articulates a general truth

when he speaks of his own writing.

I can't go to work on a piece unless I have some essentially human truth that I believe very passionately and that I hope shall transcend time and region.123

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