

John Buell's Playground

The settings for John Buell's first three novels, *The Pyx*, *Four Days*, and *The Shrewsdale Exist* are vaguely identifiable as Montreal in the first two and northern New York state in the third. But these places are kept unspecified with such deliberate care that readers cannot help noticing the artful dodging. In Buell's grim and violent novels characters move about in spaces so familiar to themselves that a reader who wants a sure fix on the North-American map is unprovided for. He can recognize, of course, the urban, the suburban, the smalltown, and so on, but these are more conditions than places, and he begins to suspect that he is being nudged toward conclusions that have to do with "the human condition," or some other such major abstraction. Above all, he is never allowed to imagine that political boundaries, regional cultures, or local traditions make any difference in what really matters.

Buell has been publicly questioned on this point, and particularly asked to regard his own art against the background of recent enthusiasm for national literature with its penchant for *our* places—*our* culture.

"Well," says Buell, "if you've got a good story your setting can be virtually anywhere. And if you happen to be a Canadian, your setting's going to be Canadian, but if you write a novel whose whole import is that you're describing the streets of Montreal, or Toronto, or Vancouver, it's not going to be much of a novel. You can get that by buying a map."¹

In this interview he goes on so sure-mindedly and convincingly that we must be persuaded he is no mere sycophant seeking international reputation by blurring Canadian details, but a downright committed artist hankering after universals. Buell is to be admired for consistency in heeding his truth-telling muse and not jumping on new bandwagons.

It is momentarily surprising, then, to find that his fourth novel, *Playground*,² is peppered with so many specified and exact Canadian locations as to invite the curious to confirm their accuracy with roadmap and atlas. His hero does not merely travel from a city to the great woods as might Joe Grant of *The Shrewsdale Exist*. Spence Morison goes from Baie d'Urfé via 2 and 20 east to Montreal, stays on the expressway through the city, crosses the Champlain Bridge, proceeds to Quebec City, goes north to 73N which becomes 175, forks northwest to 189 and then on to 169 going west on the south shore of Lac St. Jean through Chambord and Val Jalbert and Roberval and finally St. Felicien, where he spends the night in a motel. Not yet at his destination, he will proceed next day to Chibougamu, where he plans to fly alone in a Cessna to Lac des Grises, 80 miles away 5⁰ north of due west. This selection of detail from the first few pages of the novel—more minute references to places have been excised here—seems to exhibit Buell making up for prior deficiencies, perhaps with hyperbolic irony.

But the change is only apparent. It is Buell's character, Spence Morison, a prosperous, suburban, middle-aged executive—hooked on efficiency, planning, route markings, brandnames, clock-readings and the like—whose mind demands the assuring specificity of time and place, and though this Morison, the technology-ridden modern man, operates out of Montreal, he is of a type to be found, one supposes, in any modern metropolis. His story is a story because of the proximity to a wilderness large enough to be lost in, and once that happens

all this needless clamor for putting novels in Toronto or Toledo is revealed for the shallow matter it is. The Canadian North could be a fiefdom of Paraguay for all it will help Spence Morison. We eventually get even the irony that Canadian bills are more valuable as ignitable kindling than as currency to a poor fellow whose plane goes down in uninhabited terrain; and for all his maps, charts, and mental doodads, Morison comes to feel that when he is lost he isn't "even at a real place" (p. 85).

Morison drops out of official reality in this existential parable-novel because of a pair of sportive gestures that are reflected in the ironic "playground" of the title. He and his prosperous male friends choose to take a fishing vacation, and Spence travels north ahead of them to prepare camp at Lac des Grises. Flying alone from Chibougamu, he follows a whim to abandon his flight plan and explore a vast lake. A sudden storm forces him down, the turbulent lake supports the Cessna only long enough for him to escape from it, and after he struggles exhaustedly to shore he finds himself—because of the vacation, because of his whim—amidst a *real* reality with no markers and very few relics and tools from the old, official, charted reality. Play has had its consequences, and now the mind must play in these elemental conditions where the game is for mortal stakes.

Buell's main character, Morison—to all intents and purposes the only one in the novel, whose consciousness is continuously reported to us throughout—now assumes a vitality and plausibility that was lacking before. Because the work is a kind of allegory, we must accept the Morison who amid the complexity of social intercourse and economic conditions had manipulated the details of that existence with 100% efficiency. Though no such grotesque paragon or horrid perpetual winner can be imagined to exist, there is no harm in the invention—especially since all of Spence's technology and his assurances sink to the bottom of the northern lake in the downed Cessna.

Morison's real game, survival without the continuities of society and culture, is brilliantly rendered by Buell. His struggles with the exigencies of hunger, thirst, and the need for shelter are engrossing in themselves, but more important is the portrayal of Morison's mind, alerted to emergency keenness and aware of its own need to maintain its balance and worth. Efficiency now becomes redefined by the new context: conservation of physical energy and mental equilibrium. These are conditions under which the mind asks not merely of itself to become a schemer after means of spearing trout, but also how much it can afford of yearning, imagining, despair, and even restful blankness. It seems fair to say, since Spence tells his wife after his ordeal that he has "come to know . . . things," that some of those things have to do with what has been reported to us tellingly—the play of mind for all the chips in this wilderness playground—that the pithy philosophic insights uttered internally under the duress of primal danger have application and value to those of us who have never quite been derailed from our delusory sure routes and routines.

Thus the reader of *Playground* cannot be blamed for seeing Spence Morison as Buell's attempt to give us a twentieth-century Crusoe, for the comparison involves more than just a man-alone-against-nature story. Like Defoe, Buell seeks truth by prying man out of his social context and out of his ordinary contingent existence. When Crusoe searches his wild island and his panicked mind for markers of an ordered divine providence, Spence Morison meets his wilderness by exploring his own resources of mind and body, and alone, makes whatever operable and responsible psychological and philosophical order he can against the chaos. Though the quests may differ, the assumptions

are the same: human truth is known through an analytical separation of man from the states where he is usually to be found. In this respect it is interesting to note that Buell's earlier novels, like many of Defoe's, portray the criminal—another sort of character who can be imagined as operating beyond boundaries and having to make his own alert and crucial moves, moment by moment.

It is possible, of course, to quarrel with Buell's assumptions by suggesting that such inventions, insofar as they seem to deny the integral importance of cultural places and conditions—these are certainly not invariably soporifics—are unnecessary melodramas. But Buell and we, like those in Defoe's age, live in a world in which the weight of social reality lies heavy upon us; we can hardly be blamed for enjoying the murdering to dissect, and playing with the fiction that our separated man alone encounters, most dramatically, truer truth.

Playground, especially in its middle portion, once Morison's presumed ordinary life is shucked, is probably Buell's best writing to date. It has intensity and moment found rarely enough in any novelist, though he has perhaps matched it before in portions of *Four Days*. It should be observed here, as it has been before, that Buell is an excellent craftsman indeed—above all, a serious novelist. He is, perhaps, the kind of serious novelist who ought to have his leg pulled now and then, but as Spence Morison discovered when jokes kept popping into his mind in the boonidocks, one has to wonder about the usefulness and pertinence of them in a sobering dangerous existence. Most of the jokes worth repeating are those that are made by an earnest fellow observing grim absurdities in the human condition.

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NOTES

¹Gilbert Drolet, "A Conversation with John Buell, Canadian Novelist," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 3, No. 2 (1974), 68.

²John Buell, *Playground* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976).