AN APPROXIMATION OF POETRY: THE SHORT STORIES OF JOHN METCALF

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Many readers in Canada — but particularly critics and reviewers, it seems — tend to believe that as a literary form the novel is intrinsically superior to the short story.[1] But, even in terms of aesthetic values — let alone in terms of moral and social values — such comparative judgments seem to me to be completely unwarranted. Can one really argue logically that a symphony is more inherently valuable than a piece of chamber music? Can one really argue logically that Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel is more inherently valuable than Hilliard's miniature "A Courtly Sonneteer"? Indeed, can one really argue logically that the novel is more inherently valuable than the short story? The short story must be judged on its own terms for what it is. The prevailing critical attitude, however, is that writing short stories is merely an apprenticeship for writing novels, and this assumption about the inferiority of the short story has had, I suspect, an insidious effect upon the careers of many writers, for some of them must have certainly felt the need to produce a novel because of such external pressure when they really had no business in the novel at all. John Metcalf is a case in point, for although Metcalf's novel *Going Down Slow* is everywhere filled with scenes of superb writing, it is, as perhaps Metcalf himself would now agree, almost a total disaster as a novel. *Going Down Slow* should really be read as a loosely connected series of short stories, for Metcalf is not a novelist. He is a short story writer — in my judgment, one of the best we have in this country — and to give a sense of what Metcalf's conception of the short story is and to illustrate his expertise in the form, I should like to focus on a self-contained sequence of five stories from his recent collection, *The Teeth of My Father* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1975), which, although thematically related, exhibit a considerable stylistic and rhetorical range — "The Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe," "The Practice of the Craft," "Gentle as Flowers Make the Stones," "The Years in Exile," and "The Teeth of My Father."

For Metcalf, the short story is an approximation of poetry in that it offers to the reader through the subtlety and complexity of its linguistic and imagistic patterns a brief but intense insight into life at its most fundamental psychological and emotional level. The words of a Metcalf story are a springboard, points of departure, for the actual story that we, the reader, create with an imaginative response; for, through its conciseness and intensity, a Metcalf story asks us to fill out its narrative or dramatic frame by acts of inference and imagination. In comparison to a play, a Metcalf short story is a self-sufficient scene taken from a drama. In comparison to a novel, a Metcalf short story is a compressed narrative,

[1] A somewhat longer version of this essay was first delivered as a paper to the University of Ottawa Short Story Conference in November, 1975.

concentrating on striking details and inviting us to make psychological connections and to draw appropriate conclusions. In other words, the narrative and dramatic dimensions of a Metcalf story, as in poetry, are elliptical. The stories move imagistically and associationally as poems do, and, as in poetry, any descriptions that we receive work less as precise, detailed descriptions of particular objects than as metaphors conveying the attitudes and feelings of the perceiving consciousness. Because of this conception of the short story, Metcalf consistently works with either a first-person point of view, in which case the narrative voice is close to his own, or with a limited, controlled third-person point of view in which the sensibility is first-person perception but which allows Metcalf as writer the possibility of detachment and rhetorical flexibility.

The five stories with which I am concerned were all written over a period of a year and a half, but they were not, I understand, consciously planned as a related group of stories. Presumably, they are merely the cumulative products of Metcalf's thematic preoccupations during a certain period of time. They do, nevertheless, form a self-contained sequence, and had I been the editor of the volume *The Teeth of My Father,* I should have arranged them in the order I have given above, not in the order in which they appear in that book. All five stories are concerned in different ways with different aspects of the same dilemma: the plight of the artist in terms of either the relationship between the artist and society or the relationship between the artist's execution of his craft and his own personal life. As I have arranged the sequence, the movement from the first to the fifth story reveals a progressive internalization and particularization of the artist's predicament. For example, the first story, "The Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe," metaphorically dramatizes the artist's tenuous relationship to society and, through the ultimately hostile and unappreciative audience that witnesses the performance by the boys brass band, suggests the essentially vulnerable position of the artist vis-à-vis his community. The fourth story in my arrangement, "The Years in Exile," through a first-person *persona* who is a novelist, explores the built-in tension of an artist's life in terms of a division within the artist's own mind in that the *persona*'s memories of his childhood in England — because he has "fictionalized" the past — are more real to him than his present moment in Canada as a famous novelist. The artist figures in the first four stories represent any artist who is obliged to live in the real world but create idealized objects. The fifth story, "The Teeth of My Father," although it deals generally with the relationship between factual and fictional truth, focuses on Metcalf's own concerns as an artist or writer and on the relationship between his own life and his own fiction.

As in many of Metcalf's stories, there is a strong satiric vein, which often verges on outright savage ridicule, in "The Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe." The story moves on a bitterly humourous level; but it is, on a more subtle, almost allegorical, level, a story about an artistic event — the performance by a German boys band, called "The International Amity Boys Brass Band," at the Municipal Entertainments in the Pleasure Gardens of Edinburgh on a certain summer evening. Both the words "International" and "Amity" take on ironic significance as we move through the story, for Metcalf has deliberately established an extreme situation in which the audience is anything but elite and coterie and in which there are likely to be racial and nationalistic prejudices involved in

the response to the performance by the band, a circumstance intensified by having the Glasgow Variety Show precede the Essen Brass Band. The attitude towards the artist is frankly elitist and somewhat romantic. It is an unqualified sympathetic view, increased by the fact that the members of the band are merely boys, one of whom, Heine, is symbolically attacked as artist when he is physically wounded by "a stone, a bottle, something thrown from the darkness" of the audience (p. 21). There is no sense of authorial irony about the artist here: Metcalf simply does not choose to explore the irony of the artist's choice to be an artist.

The point of view in the story is a controlled third-person perspective. Everything is seen through the eyes of an anonymous onlooker, a nonpersonalized traveller. The selectivity of details, the value judgments made, and the feelings and attitudes are those of the traveller, but Metcalf does not really circumscribe the perceptual ability of the traveller. There is, in fact, an absolute coincidence between the traveller's views and the author's, for the purpose of the anonymous traveller is solely to establish a rhetorical stance of objectivity and detachment. Had Metcalf used a first-person point of view, for example, the credibility of the sordid context in which the artistic performance takes place would have been questionable. Actually, the point of view is analogous to the relationship between a director and his camera in a film. Metcalf is the director, and the traveller's preceptions — visual and emotional — are the camera: where he looks and on what he focuses — value judgments in themselves — are determined by Metcalf. The analogy is not inappropriate, for there is an obvious sense of cinematography in the story — a constant shifting of angles of vision from the stage to the audience, focusing on a part of that audience, the American family; back to the stage, focusing on a part of the band; etcetera — and, as in film, as the narrative becomes increasingly more tense and dramatic, the reader's awareness of the particular point of view — that is, that these are the observations of the traveller — diminishes. By the end of the story, it is we who now see the horror of the event.

The character of Ken Smythe, the public relations man for The Essen International Amity Boys Brass Band, suggests that one of the reasons for a division between the artist and his audience is the unwarranted intervention of such mediating figures. In an analogy to literature, Smythe might correspond to the publisher, editor, bookseller, or — God forbid! — the critic. He is completely ignorant about both the compositions the band has chosen to play and the quality of their performing art. As the program continues, he proceeds to get drunk and, in so doing, increasingly reveals his racism and his lower-class, boorish values. Despite the veneer of middle-class manners, his voice reveals itself as working class. This disparity is suggested, first of all, in the details of his appearance and in our first glimpse of his behaviour:

> A man in a blue blazer and grey flannels came on and lowered the microphone. One of the two men who had been setting out the chairs spoke to him as they were leaving the stage.
>
> "What, mate?" boomed over the sound-system as the blazer man turned in answer.
>
> There was a brightly coloured badge on the breast pocket. The blazer man nodded and then turned back tapping the microphone head and blowing into it. He cleared his throat.

> "Good evening . . ." he began, but then waited as people edged along the wooden rows back to their seats. His sleek hair gleamed in the lights. (pp. 11-12)

Notice the sense of unprofessionalism, the betrayal of the lower class in the idiom "mate," the pejorative connotations in the carefully chosen adjective "sleek," and the glossy, artificial suggestions in the entire remark, "His sleek hair gleamed in the lights."

The discrepancy in Smythe's character is also suggested in the ironic dimensions of the title of the story — the pretentiousness in the name "Smythe" instead of "Smith," the disparity in the juxtaposition of the informal "Ken" where one would expect "Kenneth," and the fundamental irony of "strange" and the ironic pomposity of "aberration" in that we ultimately learn that his vulgar behaviour is not strange at all and certainly not an aberration. It is merely his normal nature manifesting itself. Smythe is really responsible for the chaos and horror that we witness, but the story makes clear that it is necessary to perform the craft in spite of such false mediators.

It is necessary to perform the craft in spite of other obstacles too. Metcalf spends considerable space, as he establishes firmly the point of view of the traveller, detailing the time and the physical and social characteristics of the environment in which the Municipal Entertainments will take place because the details are subtle metaphors for the vulgarity of the artistic tastes and sensibilities of the audience for which the band must perform. The story begins with a fading vision of a romantic ideal, represented by Edinburgh Castle, and with a literal and metaphorical descent into darkness:

> . . . High above the city, Edinburgh Castle was just beginning to lose detail in the evening light.
>
> He lingered for a few minutes listening at the crowd's edge to a corner-missionary; a girl gave him a leaflet. He wandered on past family groups of Americans, past knots of boys and girls with haversacks and guitars, past a party of French schoolboys. . . .
>
> Tourists milled along the gravel paths between fragrant rose-beds and photographed each other against the background of the floral clock. Beyond the orange paths, the lawns were dotted with couples and families, small children running and screaming. A park-keeper in a grey suit plodded after a group of boys who were playing football. . . .
>
> He strolled on along Princes Street until he came to a flight of steps leading down into the Gardens. An ice-cream cart stood near the bandshell and he joined the queue of children and mothers and bought a sixpenny cone. He studied the large notice-board that stood in front of the stage. . . .
>
> He glanced at his watch and then strolled around the curve of the paling fence to the entrance. He paid his one shilling and sixpence and sat in the corner of an empty row. He finished the ice cream. Rolling and unrolling the blue ticket, he stared down into the cave of the bandshell. The shouting startled him.
>
> A mob of soldiers from the garrison were running across the lawn booting a football in long passes, with the boys chasing after yelling. As they neared the enclosure, one of the soldiers turned and

> punted the ball black into the sky. It crashed through the branches of the oak tree near the ice-cream cart; leaves drifted down.
>
> The father, his flapping plastic mac catching on seatbacks, worked his way along the row. He was wearing a kilt and a tartan tam. Americans, by their conversation. The mother carried a tartan hold-all. The two children wore jeans and tartan shirts. The father unslung his light-meter and held it at various angles. The enclosure was filling up. A man in evening dress carried away the notice-board and was applauded by the soldiers and youths who were sitting in the front rows. The bulbs around the bandshell's rim flickered and shone; the stage filled with light. The father consulted a photographic manual. Twilight was closing in. (pp. 7-8)

The startling shout and the football crashing through the trees here metaphorically anticipate the frenzied havoc that will ensue during the performance of the band.

The first performance that we witness is that of The Glasgow Variety Show to which we are introduced by a second-rate MC comedian whose initial remark, although uttered in jest, ironically foreshadows the real hostility that will emerge later:

> . . . As the piper finished, a short, fat man in evening dress bustled out trailing the cord of a hand-mike. He bowed to the piper and then held up his hand for silence.
>
> "You're hostile before we've even started, aren't you?". . .(p. 9)

Metcalf uses The Glasgow Variety Show for juxtaposed ironic effects. To begin with, it is a low vulgar form of art, the sort of acts that one might have seen on *The Ed Sullivan Show* or in a vaudeville theatre:

> Accompanying herself on an accordion, Miss Christine McPhail sang a medley of Scottish songs.
>
> She was followed by the amazing dance team of Alan and Mary Oliphant.
>
> They were followed by the ever-popular Georgie Douglas, who played tunes by striking tumblers that held differing levels of water.
>
> The rising comedian, Peter Tane told stories about his wife, his mother-in-law, the difficulties of getting his car repaired, the driving habits of his wife and mother-in-law.
>
> He was followed by Alec and Marjorie who roller-skated in tight circles whilst playing, respectively, the violin and tambourine.
>
> Vlaldimir produced playing cards, ping-pong balls, handkerchiefs, flags, rabbits and doves from tubes, hats, pockets and his nose. He ended by sawing Wanda in half.
>
> "*And now*," said the short, fat man, "*now*, it is an honour to present those two great stars of our own National Opera Company, the ever-young, the ever-popular, those dearly loved . . . ."
>
> "Get ON with it," bawled a voice from the darkness.
>
> "Thank you," said the short, fat man bowing and smiling.
>
> "Ladies and gentlemen," he continued, "those *luminaries*, Scotland's best loved soprano voice — Miss Helen Foster and . . . ."
>
> Wailing nearer and nearer along Princes Street the siren of an ambulance or police car.

> "And here she comes now! cried the short, fat man flinging out an arm towards the pulsating sound. "Always practising!"
>
> He giggled and held up his hand.
>
> "And appearing with her, the baritone splendour of Sir Harry McKay! Who, who has often been heard to say, 'Once a king always a king but once a knight is enough!' Thank you. No levity, I beg you. Ladies and gentlemen, I humbly give you Scotland's pride — Miss Helen Foster and Sir Harry McKay!"
>
> Accompanied on the piano by the short, fat man, Miss Foster and Sir Harry sang lengthy selections from *The King and I, Desert Song, Oklahoma,* and *South Pacific.* The audience was becoming restive. Miss Foster then sang *Ave Maria.* Following this, she and Sir Harry, holding hands, sang several selections from *The Sound of Music.* (pp. 9-11)

The voice from the darkness, like the MC's remark about hostility, is a prelude to the later active aggression of the audience towards the brass band; and the paragraphed detail about the wailing siren, in its isolation and incongruous juxtaposition, suggests the external interference with which the artist must cope in performing his craft and foreshadows the intense external pressures in spite of which the band must perform.

The art of the Glasgow Variety Show contrasts strikingly with the professional, disciplined, and austere performance of the brass band, qualities that Metcalf initially suggests in the stylistic and grammatical precision of the first sentences he uses to describe the band's opening selection:

> . . . Suddenly onto the stage strode a man in a black suit, halted, faced the silent band. The arm of Herr Kunst rose; the arm of Herr Kunst descended.
>
> The burst of sound was crisp and perfect, the sections rising and sitting as one man, the soloists flawless. Herr Kunst stood rigid except for the metronome pump of his elbows. (p. 13)

"Kunst," of course, means in German "art," and, together with Fraulein Hohenstaufen and Heine, he is the principal representative of the artist in the story.

The response to The Glasgow Variety Show is enthusiastic, a response that ironically suggests the limited tastes of the audience and thus intensifies the anxiety of the brass band's performance for such an audience. But the restiveness of the audience before and during the performance suggests an uneasiness about art in general, and there is also the strong suggestion that the positive response occurs not solely or even primarily as a response to the art of the performers as art but because the performers are Scottish. Through the juxtaposition of two levels of art, then, a low and a high form, and the juxtaposition of two traditionally antagonistic national labels on that art, Metcalf is subtlely suggesting by the differentiated response to the two performances that art as art transcends national boundaries. That the audience, with the help of Ken Smythe, is actively hostile to the high and responsive to the low suggests that nationalism and racism distort an appreciation of art and that the burden of communication does not rest solely with the artist. The audience must educate itself, and Metcalf deliberately intensifies the strain for a pure

aesthetic response from his reader by conjuring up the morally repugnant associations of Nazism and the Hitler youth movement in his descriptions of the military appearance and behaviour of Herr Kunst and the band.

Metcalf, throughout all his stories, frequently uses the paragraph as a rhetorical device to emphasize the importance of a detail or an image by the implied status in the isolating effect, an effect that he often uses for ironic purposes. The sinister nature of the meaning of the restive crowd is emphasized, for example, in the following paragraph:

> On the grass below the stage, a confusion of dark figures marched. (p. 20)

The symbolic dissolution of Fraulein Hohenstaufen and her diminished strength in contrast to Herr Kunst as she begins to yield to the pressure of the mob are suggested in the following paragraph:

> A long wisp of hair had worked loose from the Fraulein's coiled braids. Her fingers tried to brush it from her face and tuck it behind her ear. She half-turned for a moment to glance at Herr Kunst's back. (p. 19)

As the story moves towards its climax, as the crowd becomes increasingly frenzied, the rhythm of the sentences and the intensity of the language, as well as the paragraphing, all convey the rising emotional crescendo of the moment only to end with the deflating, abrupt, and emotionally staggering attack on the artist:

> Softly the first notes, the tinkling glockenspiel behind the clarinets, the trumpets riding round and mellow on the roll and slide of the trombones, the smooth hump of the tuba. Cheers erupted as the crowd recognized the opening of *Colonel Bogey*. The volume of the march swelled. Here and there in the crowd groups began to whistle the theme; some started to stamp out the beat. Driven by little Hans and the boy with the cymbals, the marching music sparkled. The rhythmic stamping, the whistling, grew louder and louder, spreading through the crowd. The louder the stamping, the louder played the band.
>
> Ken Smythe shouldered arms with a folded music stand; he presented arms; he chucked the music stand into the night.
>
> "It was a movie!" shouted the father, lowering his camera and leaning across. "In a British movie!"
>
> On the grass below the stage, a confusion of dark figures marched.
>
> From the side of the stage, Ken Smythe pointed at Herr Kunst and then tapped himself on the chest and then worked his arms in a pantomime of conducting. He encouraged the trombones; reproved the trumpets; fluttered at the clarinets. As the theme came in again, he seemed to be singing.
>
> At first, it was only voices heard in the tumult of stamping and whistling. More voices joined; more; distinguishable words; voices closer and closer until the wave Ken Smythe had started had rolled to the back of the enclosure. The roaring voices and the pounding feet had drowned the band although the boys still played. The fixed rows of seats were shuddering.
>
> Ken Smythe launched the crowd into yet another chorus.

> HITLER HAD ONLY GOT ONE BALL
> GOERING TWO BUT VERY SMALL
> HIMMLER WAS VERY SIMLAR
> BUT POOR OLD GOBALLS HAD NO BALLS
> AT ALL
>
> The father was standing on his seat.
>
> BOLLOCKS! roared the crowd THEY MAKE A
> TASTY STEW! BOLLOCKS!
>
> Heine suddenly staggered, dropping his trumpet and half-falling against the boy next to him. His hands covered his face. Herr Kunst was at his side in two strides. A stone, a bottle, something thrown from the darkness. Blood was shining, trickling down the backs of his hands. Herr Kunst tried to pry his fingers loose.
>
> "The colour!" screamed the mother, tugging at the edge of the father's plastic mac.
>
> "Use the colour film!" (pp. 20-21)

One should notice here that the power and emotional efficacy of the band's performance itself contributes paradoxically to the attack upon the artist.

Throughout the entire event, Metcalf has interspersed at strategic points details of the American family behaving as if they were at Yankee Stadium and filming the event on their camera, and he ends with the total moral and emotional disparity of their response and with the greater horror of their recording the horror of the assault. They are just as guilty, if not more so, as the mob not only because they are implicitly part of the mob, but also because they wish to record and preserve the moral outrage. Perhaps we are all culpable, even the traveller, who, it will be recalled, "joined the queue of children and mothers and bought a sixpenny cone" (p. 8).

The second story in my sequence, "The Practice of the Craft," deals openly with the tension between the artist's professional and personal life. It is the story of a professional actor who is playing the lead role in a West End farce about a man whose younger wife is unfaithful to him and which actor, as we gradually learn through carefully placed expository details throughout the story, is suffering the same fate in his own personal life as the character whom he portrays in the play. The rhetorical thrust of the story suggests that in order to practice the craft, it might be necessary for the artist to sacrifice the personal reality of his own life for the sake of the craft itself. The excruciating agony of this dilemma is emphasized by the ironic parallel between the actor's own personal situation and the plot of the play: every night in a small provincial theatre, he acts out a farce of the tragedy of his own life; and he will continue, must continue, to perform this ritualistic masochism simply because he is a professional actor and because his pain is the price that he must pay for what he is.

The suffering of his situation is intensified simply because of his awareness of the parallel between himself and the character he plays. The tension between his professional and personal life would have still existed had he been playing any other role, but that he must play himself doubles

the ironic pressure. Two other factors contribute significantly to this irony. Although the actor is a thoroughly professional and dedicated craftsman, he is not really a star, and he is not practicing his craft, say, on Broadway or in Hollywood. The fame and monetary rewards resulting from such a situation would have extenuated the irony of his circumstances, would have made his decision to sacrifice his personal life more understandable and acceptable, but Metcalf obviates such a possibility by focusing on a pure dedication to the craft itself, however dubious the rewards of that dedication are. That the actor knows that the play itself is second-rate drama and that his part in it is less than demanding for his acting talents compound the irony and stress his professionalism, for, despite these inadequacies, he will do a thoroughly professional job.

Metcalf communicates the want-ought nature of the actor's predicament in several ways. He is continually juxtaposing descriptive details about the actor's professional habits with glimpses into the actor's mind that reveal the anxiety of his personal life, and the effect is twofold — both irony and a heightened emotional contrast. The indecorum of the contiguous details stresses their difference and intensifies the emotional impact of their juxtaposition:

> His make-up was simple and quickly done, merely an accenting of the existing age lines. He moved the stick of base and the maroon liner to one side. He had phoned Laurion in Montreal and accepted Willie Loman, rehearsals to start one day after the tour ended. There had been no offers, no messages from Toronto. He had phoned her again last night.
>
> *Are you remembering to water the plants?*
>
> He sat staring at his reflection.
>
> In three short years.
>
> *Are you remembering to water the plants?*
>
> . . . .
>
> He couldn't say what his heart was bursting to say.
>
> He set the stick of No. 18 and the maroon liner in their places in his box and wiped his hands on a towel.
>
> His heart broke to say:
>
> *I love you. I'm lonely for you, lost without you. Come tonight. Tomorrow. Finish the engagement with me. Come on tour. Come to me.*
>
> What would she say if he did, if he did speak? Something about her bridge game? Something sensible about watering the plants, taking messages, cancelling the milk, the care of the cat?
>
> Or worse.
>
> *Neeni, don't tell me you've been drinking!*
>
> He could hear the archness in her voice.
>
> *Neeni, darling, don't be so dramatic!*
>
> He stood to slip on the smoking jacket and bent towards the mirror to adjust the bow-tie. Katie came in to hang his shirt in the closet for the second act. He wiped the counter clean and then looked at himself in the mirror. (pp. 54-56)

Metcalf also uses typography to stress the diametric dimensions of the actor's condition. In the following passage, "Luck Love Janet" and the code on the telegram are both printed in full capitals and indented paragraphs:

The message on the telegram read:

LUCK LOVE JANET

The stage manager's voice cut in over the house music and the noise of the audience.

Five minutes. Five minutes, please.

Neil Peters found himself reading the mysterious code on the telegram form.

ECB 140 (141140)
TNV 246 CRT TORONTO 9 941P EDT. (pp. 46-47)

By inviting a visual identification between the two groups of words, Metcalf is implying that they should be equated in other ways: both are indecipherable, inscrutable; both are painfully perplexing; both are meaningless.

Two central images in the story crystalize the actor's dilemma: his response to a child of a fellow actor, which is both a reminder of his anguish and a concrete vision of the way in which his professional and personal life could be feasibly reconciled, and the recurring anxiety dream of the log boom, a grotesque image of disintegration that suggests a self-destructive urge and represents an anticipated failure should he reveal his true feelings to his wife:

> There was something in the seemingly effortless love of Nadja that moved him painfully; the way she comforted, adjusted the little bathing suit, foresaw and prevented frustration, distracted Jessica's querulousness as the afternoon wore on. There was something efficient and essentially feminine that reminded him of Janet's movements.
>
> . . . .
>
> Jessica had tugged and tugged at her mother's hand to go and see the hot dog bonfire and he had watched them until they crested the ridge of the sand.
>
> He could remember still the expression in Janet's eyes when he had last spoken of their having a child.
>
> *Don't let's complicate things yet, Neeni.*
>
> It had been a love name once — *Neeni* — but now it sounded different, childish, tinged even with patronage. (pp. 51-52)

> . . . Every day of all the days he had spent walking and walking learning his lines, he had stopped to stare down from the bridge. An anchored tug held the boom of peeled yellow logs against the current and on the outermost logs the standing birds; slim, grey, motionless. Birds grey like statues. (p. 50)

> In his dream, he had crossed the bridge and then jumped the four or five feet down the concrete ramp of the approach road to land in the middle of a clump of pink wild flowers. As he made his way back towards the margin of the river, the reeds were thick and green, dead sedge crackling, the ground marshy. His shoes were soon soaked and then he was struggling through thick mud which bubbled and stank with each step.

> The peeled logs were icy to the touch, slimy with sap and water. As he stepped onto the jammed and riding logs at the shore and started forward, the poised herons on the far edge of the boom lumbered into the air and beat down river. The logs thinned, moving under him, stepping quicker and quicker until they parted and he stumbled into the water. He saw his face and one hand above the logs before they closed over him; a grasping talon of a hand, a face from Edvard Munch. (pp. 52-53)

Later, in his dressing room, the image of the log boom recurs, suggesting in its tone and precise adjectives an acceptance of the way things really are and the way they must be:

> He went back into the dressing room, and sipping the bitter coffee, stared at his face. Not a face from Edvard Munch. Quite the wrong image. Dreams distorted things. No desperate clinging. The logs would part, would ride together again, smooth acceptance into the brown world of the river. (p. 53)

Such a story might generate an unwarranted sentimentality, but Metcalf mitigates the possibility of excessive pathos by allowing the actor, in four one-sentence paragraphs that dramatize the nature of his predicament through antithetical juxtaposition, to accept his pain and to mock it simultaneously:

> . . . He wiped the counter clean and then looked at himself in the mirror.
>
> Iago to his own Othello?
>
> He shrugged the jacket to settle it comfortably.
>
> Her last consort had even left a toothbrush.
>
> He bowed to his reflection. (p. 56)

Through his ironic bow to himself in the bright lights of the dressing room mirror, a physical gesture that is a ritual of his profession, he exhibits an emotional acceptance of both the mutilation of his feelings imposed upon him by his wife's behaviour and the pain of the discipline imposed upon him by himself to parody himself. The distancing effect is necessary here, for it not only reduces the sentimentality for the reader, but also tempers the self-pity of the actor. The self-mockery, moreover, as well as the actor's sympathy for Katie, a young technical assistant who has given up everything to be part of the theatrical company, indicates that, unlike in "The Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe," Metcalf is aware of the fundamental irony of the artist's choice to be an artist. By definition, he must be separated from his community, but that is a conscious choice.

As in "The Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe," there is a prominent satiric strain in "Gentle as Flowers Make the Stones" — ridicule of real estate agencies, hippies, nature-organic freaks, women's liberation, pseudo-poets, pseudo-novelists, *avante-garde* literary magazines, book review editors, *Readers Digest*, booksellers, the Canadian Author's Association, academe, and suburbia and the Jewish nouveau riche. The satire, however, is not mere invective self-indulgence on the author's part. The attitudes of ridicule are a device of characterization, for we see everything

through the eyes of a poet who lives purely and simply for the art that he practices. Despite the exigencies of his life — his need for money, food, shelter, human companionship, even the necessity to defecate — he must practice his craft. In a washroom of *The Montreal Herald* in four one-sentence paragraphs:

> He lowered his trousers and sat.
> He needed money.
> He needed breakfast.
> He needed a place to live. (p. 29)

And later in two one-sentence paragraphs:

> He strained and grunted.
> *veteres patronos.* (p. 30)

And still later in a restaurant:

> He found that he was gazing at the cinnamon Danish; he wanted the cinnamon Danish very much. He could feel the pressure of the final stanza, the bulge and push of it in his head. The hunger had turned to hollow pain. (p. 35)

Throughout the story, he is composing a poem in his mind, a translation of one of Martial's epigrams that is an elegy for a dead child, and the completion of the poem, which is the climax of the story, occurs during a moment of sexual climax with a woman who is presumably emotionally and sexually starved for him. While the entire sexual encounter is taking place, however, all that is going on in his mind is the birth of the poem that he has been working on all day.

The story suggests that to be an artist is to be utterly cut off from life and all genuine human contact, but it also raises the issue of whether the artist's isolation is self-imposed and what his motives are in choosing to be an artist. The classical, Jonsonian precision of the poem that the poet finally creates is in stark contrast to the chaos and fragmentation of his life — not unlike the contrast between the art represented by the Essen Amity Boys Brass Band and the context in which they perform. In this contrast and in the poet's obvious joy in creativity lies a strong implication that art is superior to life and that the isolation of the artist is self-willed. The satiric attitudes thus indicate the poet's sense of superiority and self-distancing from the world. Metcalf confirms this stance by revealing at strategic points throughout the story that intensify the dialectic between art and life that the poet is divorced and making child-support payments. In the context of these expository details, the elegy that the poet is translating thus becomes a paradoxical lament for his own lost child and the normal personal life that he has given up for his craft — a lament, in other words, for the loss of life itself. The artist has sealed himself away from the world because of the demands of his art.

The poet's compulsion to lie about his occupation emphasizes his sense of vulnerability, his isolation, and his implicit awareness that his profession is unacceptable to society:

> . . . he wondered, as he often wondered, why he always had a compulsion to lie about his occupation to the people who gave him

> lifts; why he claimed to be a professor at McGill, a male nurse, a pest-control officer, a journalist. (p. 27)

Any of these tenuously acceptable professions would be considered more respectable than the profession of poet, and so as poet he withdraws from the world. The initial paragraphs of the story also lead us to an awareness of the nakedness of the artist, stripped of the vestments of normal social existence persistently attempting to generate art despite the frustrating odds against which he must try to spawn and which occasionally lead to the self-destruction of his own art:

> Fists, teeth clenched, Jim Haine stood naked and shivering staring at the lighted rectangle. He must have slept through the first knocks, the calling. Even the buzzing of the doorbell had made them nervous; he'd had to wad it up with paper days before. The pounding and shouting continued. The male was beginning to dart through the trails between the *Aponogeton crispus* and the blades of the *Echinodorus martii.*
>
> Above the pounding, words: 'passkey,' 'furniture,' 'bailiffs.'
>
> ....
>
> The female was losing colour rapidly. She'd shaken off the feeding fry and was diving and pancaking through the weed-trails.
>
> Hour after hour he had watched the two fish cleaning one of the blades of a Sword plant, watched their ritual procession, watched the female dotting the pearly eggs in rows up the length of the leaf, the milt-shedding male following; slow, solemn, seeming to move without motion, like carved galleons or bright painted rocking-horses.
>
> The first eggs had turned grey, broken down to flocculent slime; the second hatch, despite copper sulphate and the addition of peat extracts, had simply died.
>
> "I know you're in there, Mr. Haine!"
>
> A renewed burst of door-knob rattling.
>
> He had watched the parents fanning the eggs; watched them stand guard. Nightly, during the hatch, he had watched the parents transport the jelly blobs to new hiding places, watched them spitting the blobs onto the underside of leaves to hang glued and wriggling. He had watched the fry become free-swimming, discover the flat sides of their parents, wriggle and feed there from the mucous secretions.
>
> "Tomorrow . . . hands of our lawyers!"
>
> The shouting and vibration stopped too late.
>
> The frenzied Discus had turned on the fry, snapping, engulfing, beaking through their brood.
>
> A sheet of paper slid beneath the door.
>
> He didn't stay to watch the carnage; the flash of the turning fish, the litter floating across the surface of the tank, the tiny commas drifting towards the suction of the filter's mouth. (pp. 22-23)

The painstaking and delicate generative activity of the fish, of course, is a metaphor for the poetic process.

The final scene of the story, through the startling juxtaposition of the events that are literally taking place and the literal events in the poet's

head, dramatizes with a simultaneously pathetic and bitter irony the exact nature of the poet's plight:

> His fingers were moving.
> "You don't mind?"
> She moved her bottom further off the edge of the seat; she was gripping his other arm and making noises.
> The side of his face was sweaty against the shiny plastic upholstery.
> She was arching, arching herself towards him.
> Suddenly her body went rigid and she clamped his hand still. They lay quiet, the rate of her breathing slowing. Her eyes were closed; her face slack. He watched the sweep of the searchlight against the cloudbank.
> *Lie lightly, Earth . . .*
> *No.*
> After a minute or so, she moved her legs, easing herself up.
> "Mmmm," she sighed.
> She pushed him towards the other side. Her hands undoing his belt-buckle, she whispered, "Go on, lie back." She was pushing up his shirt. She lay with her cheek against his stomach and then he felt the heat of her mouth on him. Her hand moving too.
> Her hair was stiff, lacquered.
> He grunted and she moved her head; sperm pumped onto his stomach.
> They lay in silence.
> He could feel the sperm getting cold, running down his side, cold on his hip.
> "There's some Kleenex in my purse," she said.
> She wiped his thigh and stomach, and pulling down his shirt, snuggled up against him, kissing his mouth, his chin, his neck. He stroked her shoulders, back, running his hand down to her buttocks and up again. She pulled herself higher until her cheek was against his.
> "Was it good for you, too?" she whispered.
> "Mmm."
> He felt a mounting excitement.
> *All, all, dear ladies, a question of balance.*
> And he'd found it.
> His balancing pole, as it were, commas.
> COMMAS
> No risk of falling now; no staggering run up the incline of a sagging rope.
> *Earth* COMMA *lie lightly on her* COMMA *who*
> COMMA
> *Living* COMMA *scarcely burdened you.*
> Tears were welling in his half-shut eyes, the lights of the city lancing gold and silver along his wet lashes, the poem perfect.
>
> Gentle as flowers make the stones
> That comfort Liza's tender bones.
> Earth, lie lightly on her, who,
> Living, scarcely burdened you.

Feeling his hot tears on her cheek, she lifted her head to look at him.

"You're crying," she whispered. "Don't cry."

She brushed the backs of her fingers against his cheek.

"Jim?"

He stirred, shifting himself of some of her weight.

"Jim?"

She nestled against him.

"You know something?" she said. "You're very sweet."

(pp. 44-45)

The total failure here in verbal and emotional communication, the joy of the poet's creative climax and the a-generative birth of his poem in contrast to the nongenerative sexual encounter and joyless sexual climax, and merely the fact that the attempt at human contact here is on a sloppy, vulgar level in the back seat of a car — it is not even intercourse — all intensify the ironic pathos of the incident. It seems to me significant that the sexual gratification is not simultaneous and that the fellatio is not a complete act. In terms of both the theme of poetic creativity and the odds against which it must take place and the sexual and ironic generative dimensions of this scene, the entire episode should also be compared with the generative activity of the fish, the image that initiates the story. Notice, for example, merely the connection between the description of the fish as commas and the poet's discovery that commas are his "balancing pole."

Metcalf's use of a first-person point of view in the final two stories of the sequence indicates both that the narrative voice is closer to his own consciousness and that the problem of the artist's predicament that he is exploring in these five stories has become more internal and particularized. Although the novelist of "The Years in Exile," for example, is not Metcalf, he might be considered a symbolic surrogate for the author. His aesthetics are strikingly similar to Metcalf's own:

> I have always disliked Wordsworth. Once, I must admit, I thought I disliked him for his bathos, his lugubrious tone. But now I know that it is because he could not do justice to the truth; no philosophical cast of mind can do justice to particularity.
>
> I am uncomfortable with abstraction, his *or* mine. (pp. 88-89)

> What will the young man say to me this evening? And what can I say to him? It is difficult to talk to these young college men whose minds no longer move in pictures. Had he been here this morning I could, like some Zen sage, have pointed to the Monarchs about the apple leaves and preserved my silence.
>
> Particular life. Particular life.
>
> All else is tricks of the trade or inexpressible. (p. 98)

The story focuses on the inherent psychic split in the novelist's mind simply because he is a novelist. Because he has "fictionalized" the past, because he has framed "its insistence" through the internal fictionalizing process of memory, the novelist's visions of his childhood at the age of nine or ten are more real to him than his present moment in Canada as a famous novelist. The fictionalizing operation of memory, as the novelist

himself knows, is " 'the most basic form of creativity' " (p. 99). Memory, like fiction, edits, orders, and preserves experience. Memory shapes experience, giving it meaning, and ultimately yields through its mythologizing effects a sense of identity. Home is a psychic state of oneness, of identity, in which one's world is not an external environment but part of one. Consequently, the novelist's memories of his childhood past in England, because he has mythologized the past, are his internal home:

> Many might dismiss such meaningless particulars of memory.
>
> I know that I am lost in silence hours on end dwelling on another time now more real to me than this chair, more real than the sunshine filtering through the fawn and green of the willow tree. (p. 82)

> Yes, I have thought myself a pilgrim, the books my milestones. But these recent weeks, the images that haunt my nights and days . . .
>
> I have seen the holy places though I never knew it. I have travelled on, not knowing all my life that the mecca of my pilgrimage had been reached so young, and that all after was the homeward journey. (p. 83)

Because the novelist's real home lies in his visions of the past, his present moment becomes, as the title of the story implies, a metaphorical condition of exile and expatriation.

The detailed vividness and immediacy of the many passages that focus on the past throughout the story both illustrate the novelist's (and Metcalf's) aesthetic about particularity and convey the reality of the novelist's visions. He can smell the honeysuckle and feel the magistrate's ledger, which he once found in a spoiled mansion, Fortnell House, as a young boy, and the body of Patricia Hopkins, who gave him a glimpse of "the smooth cleft mound of her vagina" (p. 99) at the age of nine is "better remembered than the bodies of two wives" (p. 99). All of the descriptive passages of his experiences in the past are really metaphors of the novelist's psychic condition of being at home.

The past-present, fiction-life, dialectic that Metcalf is exploring in this story parallels other dialectics that occur in his work: art and life, reality and fantasy, factual and fictional autobiography, the child and the adult, the individual and society, innocence and experience, order and chaos, the pastoral and the urban, and the natural and the mechanistic. In "The Years in Exile," he specifically identifies the particularity and vividness of the past with nature. The colour of the petunias, the willows, the Monarch butterflies — all objects of the novelist's perception in the present moment — for example, are associated with the reality of the details perceived through memory. The story begins significantly with an immediate juxtaposition of the past and the present, the pastoral and the urban, and the natural and the synthetic and with a sense of the novelist's discomfort and alienation in the present moment:

> Although it is comfortable, I do not like this chair. I do not like its aluminum and plastic. The aluminum corrodes leaving a roughness on the arms and legs like white rust or fungus. I liked the

> chairs stacked in the summer house when I was ten, deck-chairs made of striped canvas and wood. But I am an old man; I am allowed to be crotchety.
>
> By the side of my chair in the border are some blue and white petunias. They remind me, though the shade is different, of my youngest grandson's blue and white running shoes, Adidas I believe he calls them. They are one of this year's fads. He wears them to classes at the so-called college he attends. But I must not get excited.
>
> It is one of her days. The voice of the vacuum cleaner is heard in the land. But I should not complain. I have my room, my personal things, the few books I still care to have about me. Before moving here, life was becoming difficult; the long hill up to the shopping centre for supplies I neither wished to cook nor eat, sheets, the silence broken only by the hum and shudder of the fridge. (p. 80)

One of the ways in which Metcalf stresses the reality of the novelist's fictionalized dreams of his past is by associating the state of physical decay in which the old man is with the decay of the eighteenth-century manor house, Fortnell House, which is the focal point of his reveries. The house itself stands for the vitiation of English society, manners, and values. Despite their physical decomposition, however, both the novelist and the house are alive in a more vital way through the fictionalizing activity of the novelist. The old man's movement around the lawn throughout the story in order to remain in the sunlight suggests this vitality and his desire or need to persist in the "life" of his reveries, and the story ends with the image specifically associated with his past. Although the sun has literally "long since passed over the house," he remains in the sunlight of his dreams:

> . . . I should go and shave. But I will sit a little longer in the sunshine. Here between the moored houseboats where I can watch the turn of the quicksilver dace. Here by the piles of the bridge where in the refracted sunlight swim the golden-barred and red-finned perc. (p. 101)

The stories that I have dealt with thus far have examined hypothetically through pure fictional figures the plight of the artist in general. "The Teeth of My Father" deals not only with the general problem of the relation between life and art, but also with the relationship between Metcalf's own life and his own art, short story writing. Specifically, it explores the truth of fiction as opposed to the factual truth of life, but it is also a moving elegy for Metcalf's father and a summing-up of his rhetorical concerns as a writer.

Early in the story, which incorporates whole stories or parts of others that Metcalf has previously written, the speaking "I" utters a remark that is both an admonition to and a directive for the reader:

> (I have decided to tell the truth. My stories in the River Room were not purely nostalgic; they were calculated to be funny and entertain my friend. My friend was more an acquaintance, a man I admired and wanted to impress. And 'wilful legs' was plagiarized from Dylan Thomas.) (p. 59)

The effect of this remark is multiple. It shatters the art illusion of the narrative up to this point; it suggests the possibility of more than one level of fictional reality in the story (later well-established by the incorporation of other Metcalf stories into the narrative frame); it establishes the fictional structure of the story as an autobiographical one; it draws attention to the fact that the story is indeed fiction and to the writer's performance as fiction writer; and, finally, it invites the reader to realize that whether the incidents that are about to be narrated concerning the relationship between father and son are inventive or factual is irrelevant. The story, because it is fiction, a distillation of experience, has an imaginative truth that is more real, more true emotionally and psychologically, than autobiography in any factual or historical sense. The story appears to be — indeed, admits to be through the speaking voice of the "I" — the "truth," but it is a truth that is a supreme piece of fiction. "The Teeth of My Father," then, is really about the craft of fiction itself, about the writer's art of shaping or manipulating experience to give it a greater reality.

There are several occasions in the story when Metcalf, as in the admonitory remark that I quoted earlier, deliberately shatters the art illusion to draw attention to the art of the fiction and to the fact that the story is indeed fiction. The narrator's comments on the incorporated story "Biscuits," in which there are two voices, one in italics and one in ordinary type, is the most obvious instance, but the narrator's introductions to the other incorporated stories serve the same function:

> *It is instructive, ladies and gentlemen, to examine the psychological implications of this sample of juvenilia if we may assume it to be autobiographical either in fact or impulse.*
>
> Yes, you can assume that.
>
> *What activity is the child essentially engaged in? In nothing more or less than the act of defining his identity. Through which functions does the child perform this act? Through naming, drawing, and most importantly, writing. And with which parent does this suggest identification?*
>
> *Exactly so. Exactly so. The father!*
>
> *Who, who I may remind you, is, in the words of the text, 'far away.' For the perceptive reader, the point requires no further elucidation.* (p. 63)

The incorporation of other Metcalf stories into "The Teeth of My Father" has several effects. All the stories have an autobiographical fictional structure, and so we have autobiography within autobiography, fiction within fiction; and despite the reader's factual knowledge that Metcalf did indeed write these other stories, there is the added fiction that the *persona* of "The Teeth of My Father" is the author of the stories. Is "The Teeth of My Father" "*autobiographical either in fact or impulse*" (p. 63)? "*For the perceptive reader, the point requires no further elucidation*" (p. 63).

Many of the incidents here related no doubt are pure invention — the loose box incident, for example. Many are edited facts — Metcalf's father did not make a new pair of teeth every week. But all are true emotionally and psychologically, more illustrative of the way the father really was from the writer's point of view than any factual truth. The story ends with an elegiac lament of an "I" that is if not John Metcalf in fact then John Metcalf in truth:

> I did not cry.

On the evening I received news of your death I went to the Esquire Show Bar on Stanley Street in Montreal and listened to King Curtis leading a blues band.

I did not cry.

I was irritated at your funeral by the tear-sodden faces and the predictable rhetoric of the officiating minister. Looking at your coffin, I was not moved. My thoughts were of the borrowed airfare, the yellowed soles of your feet, toenails.

I was not moved to tears.

Yet I did go into your study which still stank of your tobacco and I took your red propelling-pencil and your fountain pen.

Now, ten years later in a life half done, a life distinctly lacking in probity, I use your pen, now twice-repaired, to write my stories, your pencil for corrections.

And I am crying now.

Drunken tears but tears for you. For you. For both of us. Standing on the sidewalk in the cold fall evening of another country, my tears are scalding. (p. 79)

I hope that this brief survey of only five of John Metcalf's short stories illustrates in truth and fact the subtlety and craftsmanship of his work. Metcalf places severe demands upon his reader. He asks that his stories be read with all the attention and effort that a good poem requires, for his stories are indeed an approximation of poetry.

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