

BEYOND REALISM: RAYMOND KNISTER'S WHITE NARCISSUS

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Arenewal of interest in Raymond Knister is evident in three recently published collections of his work.¹ To date, however, *White Narcissus*, his only novel set in Canada and first published in 1929, has provoked little attention apart from a paperback reprint in 1962 with a introduction by Philip Child.² David Arnason suggests that this neglect is probably just as well: "The novel," he writes, "will not sustain hard and sophisticated academic analysis, but it will survive it."³ Much of the scant commentary on *White Narcissus* has seen it as an early experiment in realism. Desmond Pacey, for instance, links Knister with Callaghan and Grove in moving Canadian fiction away from regional and historical romance towards a realistic rendering of ordinary places and events.⁴ Although most critics agree that the novel has serious flaws, they usually assert that its strength lies in its rendering of the life of a particular place and time. Philip Child, for example, insists on Knister's "success in describing farm life and manners, and . . . his splendid talent for catching, with simple and vivid words in which realism and poetry are present but not at odds, the landscape of his homeland which he knew so well" ("Introduction," p. 12).

White Narcissus contains undeniably realistic elements in its description of farm life, but if one reads it as a realistic novel, one is certain to find serious faults in it. Realism is not an adequate category to describe either of Knister's novels. (*My Star Predominant*, his second and last novel [1934], is a historical novel about the life of John Keats.) Margot Northey has recently suggested that the gothic and the grotesque have long traditions in Canadian fiction and are more important to that fiction than we have usually supposed.⁵ *White Narcissus* confirms this view, for it contains gothic elements as well as realistic ones. Indeed it derives much of its power as a picture of life in southwestern Ontario from the tension it sets up between the two ways of

¹*The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose*, ed. Peter Stevens (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); *Selected Stories of Raymond Knister*, ed. Michael Gnarowski (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1972); and a special issue of *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, No. 2 (1975).

²Raymond Knister, *White Narcissus*, ed. Philip Child (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962). Subsequent references to this edition will be given in the text.

³David Arnason, "Preface," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, No. 2 (1975), 9.

⁴Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1961), pp. 204-05.

⁵Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 3-9. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

seeing the world which these two traditions represent. Michael Gnarowski has also suggested that some of Knister's short stories have mythical and archetypal dimensions and that, as a product of the 1920's, when such subjects were much discussed, he probably owes as much to the work of Jessie Weston and James Frazer as to Ruth Suckow and James T. Farrell.⁶ There is some evidence in *White Narcissus* to support this claim as well. *White Narcissus* is not a great novel, but for all its faults it is a significant one, and a more complex one than we have usually thought. Its place in the tradition of Canadian fiction needs more careful definition.

Realism is a notoriously tricky term, implying both a concern for accurate representation of the surface textures of ordinary life and the necessity of getting below the surface to an interpretation of the underlying social and psychological forces that are not easily accessible to ordinary observation. In the Introduction to his collection *Canadian Short Stories* (1928), Knister uses the term in its first sense, but with a keen awareness that realism in this sense is insufficient for great art:

In an absolute sense there is no objectivity. When Flaubert is bringing some undeniable picture to your recognition, he is doing it only to impose upon you some emotion which is part of his plan and the outgrowth of his own emotion. What is known as realism is only a means to an end, the end being a personal projection of the world. In passing beyond realism, even while they employ it, the significant writers of our time are achieving a portion of evolution (*First Day of Spring*, p. 394).

One of Knister's concerns in *White Narcissus* is to assert the value of a "realistic" art as opposed to a romanticized or idealized one. Richard Milne, who is a writer and the protagonist of the novel, tends to romanticize the events of his own life and the lives of others, but he eventually abandons his romanticism. Twice Richard alludes to the story of Tristram and Iseult: once indirectly when he thinks of Ada Lethen's continuing presence as "a sword between the two [her parents], so that they could never forget the bitterness of the first few days of the quarrel" (p. 35); and again, more romantically, when he perceives himself and Ada in their hopeless love for one another as "Tristram and Iseult, Lancelot and Guinevere" (p. 105). This tendency to think of himself as a hero of romance is also evident elsewhere: "he would bring all this [Ada's reasons for refusing him] to light; he would conquer it. He had been gathering his forces during all the month of being apart from her. Now he would test his will, his love for her, his belief in their happiness, test his whole ultimate life and hers" (p. 63). The fact that he does not get a chance to "test his will" at all but is prevented by an almost fortuitous resolution of Mr. and Mrs. Lethen's longstanding alienation from one another seems, from one point of view, to make for a rather abrupt and unprepared resolution to the story. Yet it constitutes a fitting comment on the inadequacy of Richard's

⁶Gnarowski, p. 12.

romantic views of his own function in the plot. On the whole, however, Richard is presented sympathetically, and at several points in the novel he is aware of how unsatisfactory his romantic stance is likely to prove. Thus, when he considers the possibility that failure to win Ada may lead to his being another isolated artist, he sees the prospect not as a glamorous, Byronic one but as absurd:

He would become after all a man essentially estranged from life, as least from the world, a romantic figure of absurd incompleteness, an unadjusted person, if successful in art, which does not demand normality, "a queer stick." All for what? "He lost a woman," one-time friends would say. (p. 77)

He also sees the inadequacy of his own writing about rural life; from the rather sketchy accounts we are given of it, it appears that Richard considers that his past work errs on the side of romance and hence is untrue to the life of the community he knows. Referring to the quarrel between the two neighbours, Carson Hymerson and Mr. Lethen, he "recalled the way — romantic it seemed to the real of the present — in which his writing had glossed over such differences, with all the life of which they formed part" (p. 84). Later he comments more extensively on his own portrayal of farm life:

In his writing, Richard Milne had concerned himself with such people as these, typical farm characters. But while he had blinked none of their littlenesses, critics had claimed that his novels presented too roseate a picture of rural life. The reason was that he had seemed to find these temporal idiosyncrasies set off in due proportion against the elemental materials of life. But, he reflected now, that attitude was part of the nostalgia he experienced from his own past in such scenes; and it was a form of idealism which he saw as applicable no more to this milieu than to any province of life more or less open to primal forces. He would not have idealized these in a setting of commerce or of society, and he had been wrong to blur them in a scene which his boyhood had known. Hence, he foresaw, a further development in his own art. An increasing surface hardness seemed to be an inevitable accompaniment to the progress of the significant novelists of his and an earlier day. (p. 110)

Knister, through his artist-figure Richard Milne, asserts the necessity of abandoning a "roseate" view of rural life, one conditioned by nostalgia for childhood, and of moving, presumably, toward a more "realistic" view. What this realistic view is to consist of, however, is not entirely clear. One possibility is that its subject is to be the reality represented by the Burnstile family — a reasonably "normal" family, with its share of squabbling and weaknesses, but one whose members function fairly harmoniously with each other and in their surroundings. This is "the daylit world of the material and of work" (p. 35), which for many readers is the most satisfactorily realized element of the novel. The Burnstiles belong to this "daylit world"; so, at first, do the Hymersons. But to restrict one's treatment to characters like these would indeed be to present

"too roseate a picture of rural life"; mere surface realism, as Knister is aware, is not enough.

Co-existing with the daylight world, however, is another one — the world of the Lethens, whose very name evokes a world of shadow and death, thus suggesting the possibility that the novel may have a mythological dimension. Some of the elements which seem anomalous if one reads the novel as a realistic one can be accounted for in this way. Ada's pallor and her white dresses seem inappropriate to a farm girl, but not to a pure heroine of romance. Indeed, the mole on her face seems to function much as Georgiana's facial blemish does for her in Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark" — as the necessary mark of human imperfection: "it was ornament and relief. It was the most endearing feature in her face; its loss would have detracted greatly. . ." (p. 111). Furthermore, in the nether world from which Richard is attempting to rescue her, she seems to be a combination of Muse, Eurydice, and Persephone. He thinks of her as his Muse: "He could not hope to see the woman as others saw her. It had been one of the twin deities of his life. His urge to expression — and this. Perhaps she was at the bottom of his urge to write" (p. 110). There are suggestions of Eurydice, too; on his first meeting with her, " 'What is it holds you, Ada?' he asked in a choking tone, as though she were dying before his eyes" (p. 36). Later he catches sight of her while he is working in the field: "looking toward it [the forest], his eye caught the figure of a woman, walking, turning back, going further within its shade" (p. 116).

These hints of the lost Eurydice may be fortuitous, and it would be a mistake to make very much of them. But there are also hints of Persephone which resonate more clearly. Ada, like Persephone, hunts for wildflowers and is connected with the cycle of seasons. She comments, "I'm inclined not to come out very often. I think today is the first since winter that I have left the farm like this. In winter, spring, autumn, it's good to come to see that there is growth, change, and death, nothing of which is bitter or gay, simply because it does return again" (p. 59). Of this, too, one could make little, were it not for the central symbol of the novel, the white narcissus itself. In realistic terms, one could more readily accept a geranium or an African violet. But the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, on which James Frazer depended for his account of Demeter and Persephone in *The Golden Bough*, identifies the narcissus as the flower which tempted Persephone beyond the reach of help in the meadow where she was seized by Pluto. It is the narcissus' association with darkness, death, and the underworld that makes it so useful to Knister, and it tends to confirm Gnarowski's suggestion that Knister was probably aware of *The Golden Bough*. The mythological allusions (if that is indeed what they are) are the more suggestive because Knister does not use them in a mechanical way. They are barely suggested, easily overlooked; but the narcissus, the various descriptions of Ada, and the name Lethen itself all contribute to the sense of a dark and threatening underworld.

That world is one of carefully nurtured injuries and resentments, of enclosed, smothering spaces, of violence, madness, and despair. Ada has been raised from childhood in a household where the parents have not spoken to each other in years; she is afraid to leave them for Richard because what warped, narrowed emotional lives they have depend almost entirely on her. Mrs. Lethen also has her potted narcissi, which permeate the closed house with a sickly sweet smell and on which she pours out the love she should be giving to her husband and daughter. It is a world of grotesques — Mr. Lethen is described as having a “grotesque manner of broaching acquaintanceship” and as being “this weird old man with the haunted eyes” (p. 86). And it is described in terms which are sometimes strongly reminiscent of the conventions of gothic fiction. The town is called Lower Warming; the old hotel is closed when Richard arrives in town from the city at the beginning of the novel; the streets are empty; the garden gates are also “primly closed” (p. 1). This forbidding note is carried on into the description of the countryside:

The road made fitful efforts at directness, and would ignore the swing of the high river banks, only a little farther on to skirt a depression, a sunken, rich flat, bearing rank, blue-green oats surrounded by drooping willows, elms through which only a glimpse of the brown ripples of water could be seen; again, underbrush, small maples, wild apples, green sumach came right to the road and hung over the fence, hiding the drop of the ravine. A place of choked vistas. (p. 20)

This landscape of “choked vistas” and “overgrown ravines” (p. 104) finds its focus in the Lethens' house, which looks more like the House of Usher or the Castle of Udolpho — dark, secret, moated, overgrown, and menacing — than like an Ontario farmhouse:

The Lethen place hid the sunset, looming beyond a dredged cut to the river, like a moat, dry and overgrown with weeds. The tangle of vegetation, which in this light seemed to overlay the buildings, was in itself a quickening token to Richard Milne's remembrance, and he slowed, paused. Great evergreens shadowed the front of the place and guided his footsteps toward the lane. Dust flurried about him impotently as he reached the little leaning gate and went across the front yard, itself no haven to him: a wild expanse of grass and pine needles shadowy and whispering to his rising excitement of insuperable awaiting barriers.

The house was old, its narrow windows peered dark from drapery of Virginia creeper, only the gables showing the weathered brick expanse which towered remote as though to scan the oblivious invader below. There was something secret but secure about the air of the house, like an awareness of its life indecipherable in dark hiding of the vines. So much of its appearance Richard Milne knew more from an act of memory than by bodily sight. He had reached the low weathered wooden gate giving on the lawn, and he became unconscious of everything for that moment, of the mysteriously quickened night, the house, the trees, the dark, the pressing sky. (pp. 32-33)

Later descriptions confirm this sense of secrecy and vague menace: "life went on in the rear portions of the house" (p. 46), and Mrs. Lethen seems to Richard to be "sinister in his mind by very reason of her appalling and helpless misery" (p. 40). Walking at night, Richard

stopped before the gloom of the Lethen house, peered among its black shadows, looked to the dulled windows, the vines which were now and again carved into relief by the moonlight, and, instead of turning back, he walked past. But it was equally vain, and, coming back, he hurried past the place as though a ghost dwelt there. . . . (p. 108)

When the daylight world intrudes, however, the sinister element fades: "under the white glare of sunlight the Lethen place was appreciably less ominous and more dilapidated than it had appeared on the previous night" (p. 66).

While the major motifs of the traditional gothic romance — the fleeing maiden, the haunted castle, the depraved priest or nobleman, the unspeakable crime — often seem extravagantly silly to modern tastes, they did provide symbols for the half-apprehended terrors and dark impulses lying beneath the surface of a supposedly rational and well-ordered world. Thus the description of the house and its inhabitants not only provides a contrast with the Burnstiles; it also gives us an insight into the psychology of Richard Milne. The house appears like a gothic castle to him partly because he often thinks in literary allusions and partly because his attempt to persuade Ada to abandon her concept of duty to her parents and marry him is, indeed, the most difficult and frightening task he has ever undertaken.

Although Knister does not appear to have discussed gothic fiction in his critical writing, it may be significant that he alludes also to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a work in which gothic conventions are transmuted into great art. Richard compares himself with Arthur Dimmesdale in that both men are victims of excessive introspection and paralysis of the will:

Phrases and images from *The Scarlet Letter* floated in his mind. He was expiating Dimmesdale's secret sin yet, after two centuries. Love could not be free yet for men and women who had taken civilization as an armour which had changed to fetters upon them. What was his whole peculiar [sic] story but that of Dimmesdale — prophetic name — a delusion no longer a delusion of sin, but of impotence and analysis which belied action and love? It was the conflict of the conscious ones of his whole generation, this confusion of outer freedom and inner doubt. (p. 108)

Having fixed *The Scarlet Letter* in our minds, Knister goes on to give us a climactic scene between Ada and Richard which takes place in a forest and is strongly reminiscent of Hawthorne's forest scene in which Hester Prynne persuades Dimmesdale to leave the place of his guilt and seek a new life. In Hawthorne's story, the forest symbolizes freedom from social codes. In *White Narcissus* it is Richard who does the persuading (the earlier parallel with

Dimmesdale is not pursued); and the forest, like the earlier "choked vistas" of the countryside, becomes a symbol of constraint, "the wilderness which guarded her heart" (p. 122), through which they must make their way to freedom. That freedom, according to Richard, is to be found in the city — not, as in so many American books, on the frontier. Richard is a very Canadian hero: like Susanna Moodie, Judith Gare and Sven Sandbo, Mr. and Mrs. Bentley, and many others, he looks for freedom not in a flight from society but in a flight toward it, a re-integration with it.

Margot Northey suggests that in *Wacousta*, as in much Canadian gothic fiction, "the deepest form of terror emanates from a demonic wilfulness" (*The Haunted Wilderness*, p. 21). Knister does not take his story so far into the gothic mode that he provides us with an instance of demonic wilfulness; Carson Hymerson's petulance hardly qualifies. Its converse, helplessness, however, is frequently mentioned; it is the keynote of the Lethens' lives. Ada "could not believe in freedom" (p. 35); Mrs. Lethen exhibits "appalling and helpless misery" (p. 40); Mr. Lethen is unable to act against Carson Hymerson's threat to take away his farm. Richard too, like Dimmesdale, must struggle against an inability to act. Conversely, the keynote of the daylight world is action and a control over externals. Richard, in his attempt to persuade Ada to abandon her parents, lectures her: "But it is our destiny: we are bound to conquer. We must subdue things; we've got to take from life even the emotions, the experience, and fulfilment we need. If we shirk that we are doing a wrong as great as that of starving in the midst of nature's abundance" (p. 44). Mr. Lethen, after the accident in which he knocks several of his wife's cherished narcissi to the floor, stamps on them in a rage and asserts, "I did it purposely!" (p. 134). It is his long-delayed ability to act "purposely" which finally ends the couple's alienation from each other and begins a restoration of a normal relationship: Mrs. Lethen begins to laugh. Richard's own will contributes nothing to this resolution, which is necessary to the marriage of the lovers; but he is at least able to lead Ada through the forest to an enclosed spot which protects without smothering, where they consummate their love.

The elements in the novel which may be identified as gothic represent Knister's attempt to go "beyond realism," to penetrate beneath the surface of circumstance and to avoid Richard's mistake of presenting "too roseate a picture of rural life." One major weakness of the novel, however, is a failure to sustain the duality of the daylight world and the dark one which Knister establishes at the beginning of the novel. Carson Hymerson is no gothic villain; his obsessive concern to dispossess the Lethens of their land has no motive more complicated or terrifying than simple avarice. There is physical violence, but it is limited to a blow or two struck in straightforward anger. Hymerson's eventual madness, which causes his removal to a mental hospital, seems more a convenient way of resolving the plot than an indication of the dark and violent forces at the heart of existence. This is not a plea for more blood and melodramatic villainy, but a suggestion that our belief in the

reality of the dark forces that the various gothic descriptions evoke is not sustained. The resolution moves the plot firmly back into the "daylit world," but it moves it there too easily for us to believe in the power of the dark one; we wonder what all the fuss was about.

White Narcissus, then, is not simply a realistic novel. It may be significant that this is a novel of southwestern Ontario, a region whose writers — from Major John Richardson to James Reaney, Graeme Gibson, and Alice Munro — display a continuing interest in the gothic. Speaking of the similarity of her own writing to that of the American South, Alice Munro has remarked that "the part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic."⁷ Her novel *Lives of Girls and Women* also presents two worlds — that of the secure and ordered town and the violent, confusing, disordered world of Del Jordan's Uncle Benny:

So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction.⁸

The two worlds converge in one of the last images of the book, which unites the ordinary and the mysterious: "People's lives in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable — deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (*Lives*, p. 212). This describes the structure of *White Narcissus* exactly. Knister juxtaposes the reality of the Burnstiles with the reality of the Lethens; the linoleum and the caves; a workaday, predictable world and a paralyzed, desperate, senseless one. In doing so he moves "beyond realism." If the result seems eccentric, this is partly because we are not used to looking for gothic elements and mythological allusions in the realistic Canadian novel. In fact, Knister's strength is in his willingness to make use of several modes to suggest a complex vision of the world.

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⁷Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 248.

⁸Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Signet, 1971), p. 22. Subsequent references will be given in the text. For this interpretation of Munro's work, I am indebted to Rae McCarthy Macdonald, "A Madman Loose in the World: The Vision of Alice Munro," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22 (Autumn, 1976), 365-74.