"BETWEEN ONE CLICHÉ AND ANOTHER":[1] LANGUAGE IN THE DOUBLE HOOK

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Critical acclaim awarded to Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* has emphasized its continuity with tradition: its biblical allusions and symbols have been interpreted as a displacement of the universal story of God's love for mankind and as a Jungian identity quest.[2] A recent issue of the avant-garde review *Open Letter*[3] devoted to Watson, however, would suggest that her work might be examined in terms of a "post-modernist" rebellion against established order. Such iconoclasm may be detected in the radical exploration of the limits of language undertaken in *The Double Hook*. Although there are many echoes of biblical creation in the fiction, I should like to show that it is above all a story of "the coming of the Word," a dramatization of the beginnings of language and cultural order in a primitive people.

Although nowhere has the sex of the author been an issue — not even when the excellence of the fiction might have been a vindication of a woman's capabilities — I should like to suggest that the revolutionary qualities in Watson's writing are a consequence of her femaleness. In spite of her having made no overt feminist statements that would point to this ambition, Watson has provided us with the basis of such an argument by her use of a quotation from Gertrude Stein (*The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*) remarking that " 'in this epoch the only real literary thinking has been done by a woman,' " because that "woman related not to an historical tradition but to a particular way of seeing."[4]

Watson's way of seeing "has set her at odds with prevailing modes of fiction as she attempts decreation." Beginning with the general notion that one "could not write about particular places in Canada: that what you'd end up with was a regional novel of some kind"[5] instead of the preferred international novel, Watson answered this challenge by rejecting both formal

[1] Ezra Pound, "Beauty of art is a brief gasp between one cliché and another." Quoted in Renato Poggio, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 82.
[2] See Beverley Mitchell, "Association and Allusion in *The Double Hook*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, No. 1 (Winter 1973), 63-70; and Margaret Morris, "The Elements Transcended," *Canadian Literature*, No. 42 (Autumn 1969), pp. 56-71.
[3] *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 1 (Winter 1974-75).
[4] "Gertrude Stein: The Style is the Machine," *Open Letter*, p. 168.
[5] "What I'm Going to Do," *Open Letter*, p. 182.

possibilities. As John Grube has pointed out,[6] the result is a novel which is "anti-Western," "anti-ethnic," and "anti-regional." According to Watson, it is also "anti-international," for it deals specifically with the alienated Indians of British Columbia and describes "how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility — if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms."[7] Having lost their language, which would open up their cultural past, the Indians suffer. Alienated, they have only fragments of experience left, fragments that have hardened into cliché, have become mechanical gestures and taken on a sinister aspect. But the Indians are not alone in this situation. All minorities feel this linguistic alienation, women above all among these marginal groups. The Indians are an objective correlative for Watson's own mistrust of language. In "Cadence, Country, Silence,"[8] Dennis Lee has expressed the problem of language for a minority whose public space is threatened:

> But if we live in space which is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking a problem to itself. For voice does issue in part from civil space. And alienation in that space will enter and undercut our writing, make it recoil upon itself, become a problem to itself.
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> The act of writing 'becomes a problem to itself' when it raises a vicious circle; when to write necessarily involves something that seems to make writing impossible. Contradictions in our civil space are one thing that makes this happen, and I am struck by the subtle connections people here have drawn between words and their own problematic public space.

Watson's Canadian nationality is one element in her suspicion of language. There are other parameters of place and time that make language an object, instead of a mirror of external reality, and before embarking on a study of the manipulation of language in *The Double Hook,* it would be well to enumerate them so that they may hover in the wings of our discussion. First there is the political space of sex. In attempting to establish the nature of "the female tradition" in writing that "historically has dealt with concerns peripheral to male concerns or at least slightly skewed from them," [9] Elaine Showalter has suggested a model for female literature in that of any "literary sub-culture, such as black, Jewish, *Canadian,* Anglo-Indian" (italics mine).[10] Certain features are common to the development of these literatures: they all go through three major phases.

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[6]John Grube, Introduction to *The Double Hook,* New Canadian Library (Toronto, 1966), pp. 12-13. All quotations from *The Double Hook* are from this edition unless specified, and page references are henchforth given in the text.

[7]"What I'm Going to Do," p. 183.

[8]Dennis Lee, "Cadence, Country, Silence," *Open Letter,* Second Series, No. 6 (Fall 1973), p. 37.

[9]Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, 1977), p. 10.

[10]Showalter, p. 13.

> First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery,* a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.[11]

In Dave Godfrey's application of this schema to Canadian literature,[12] Watson is a transitional writer exhibiting characteristics of both second ("I should") and third ("Maybe I will") phases. On the feminist scale she would occupy a similar position sharing characteristics of the "Feminist" and "Female" phases. In proposing a vision of the opposing elements united and transcended — in universal, mandala structure — *The Double Hook,* in calculated contrast to the masculine regionalist myths of Hemingway and Faulkner, develops the feminist myth of androgyny, found in the works of Virginia Woolf and her generation. Writers of the "Female" phase have shared this concern for the forging of female mythologies, but have carried their radical criticism of phallo-centric literature further to attempt to dislocate its syntax, disrupt its lexic, destroy its grammar. With its questioning of cliché, its divesting language of associations — thus creating a new way of seeing — with its awareness of silence, with its dramatization of the origins of creativity, *The Double Hook* stands beside contemporary works like those of Hélène Cixous and Madeleine Gagnon's *La venue à l'écriture* and Nicole Brossard's *L'AMER.* Watson shares the theoretical concerns of these writers, but does not go as far as they do in their linguistic experiments — hence her transitional role.

The theoretical discussions of these women are important in establishing the relationship between language and sex in Watson's work. Brossard[13] in attempting to destroy the myths of human fertility associated with the Hottentot Venus to find a new sort of female creativity in the literary text dramatizes the carnal links of mother and daughter and the verbal ones of father and daughter. Language with its grammatical rules is masculine: women are silent, creatively expressive through their bodies. Gagnon sums this up in her text "Mon corps dans l'écriture" in the first sentence: "Mon corps est mots": "My body is words."

> Like millions of women I wish to enroll my body in the struggle for something tells me — and it is not my man's knowledge — that a great part of history, for not having been thought and written by us, is solidified in the memory of the female body.[14]

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[11]Showalter, p. 13. [12]On an "Anthology" programme on CBC Radio.

[13]Nicole Brossard, *L'AMER ou le chapitre effrité* (Montreal, 1977).

[14]Madeleine Gagnon, "Mon corps dans l'écriture," in *La venue à l'écriture* (Paris, 1977), p. 63. The quotation is my rough translation of the following passage:

> Comme des millions de femmes, je veux inscrire mons corps en lutte car quelque chose me dit — et ça n'est pas ma science d'homme — qu'une grande partie de l'histoire, pour ne pas avoir été pensée et écrite par nous, s'est figée dans la mémoire du corps femelle.

Woman's language is not man's; it is gesture, sign. Ultimately it is silence. That "the Word" (communication) comes in *The Double Hook* with the birth of a baby is confirmation that Watson shares this view. Cixous extends this discussion in another direction, for she suggests that a woman's literary silence is a prelude to another more radical silence; to write is to die, for it is to move from one world into another, a world in which woman has nothing: ". . . no country, no language. No law. No grammar. Spelling once a month. No knowledge. Especially no knowledge. Writing degrees: no. Membership: none. Model: zero. Infinity."[15] For these women, language does not mirror any political, social, or psychological reality. There is no continuity between their perceptions and the language used to embody them. Language must be invented anew. But this is an "act for the future." For women have been alienated from writing as they have been from their own bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, toward the same mortal end. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history.[16] This movement, Cixous declares, can only be revolutionary, for it will overturn all known literary conventions and grammatical laws.

This resumé of the French theorists of women's language has led us in a circle to our second parameter, time, for these women are obviously practising what Barthes[17] has called "zero degree writing," writing which is the negation of itself, silence, absence, a phenomenon which Barthes analyzes in historical as well as syntactical terms. As we shall see, Watson's style bears similarities to the "written speech" that along with Camus' "blanched style" Barthes cites as examples of the extreme periods of this modernist movement. Classical language reflected a stable world: beginning with Flaubert, language became narcissistic, self-reflexive. Mallarmé with his phrase, "to speak has no connection with the reality of things," "murdered" language. Language became problematic for modern writers. Later Wittgenstein described the nature of linguistic truth as tautological ("that which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent"), and the only subject left for writers was that of their difficult relationships with their medium, language. *The Double Hook* reflects both aspects of this modernist crisis of language. The parallels between it and Eliot's *The Wasteland* have been obvious to most readers: similarities of theme, an adoption of nonlinear spatialized form, a rejection of "prose" in favour of "poetry," an identical turning to symbolism, music, and foreign languages to carry the burden of meaning English can no longer express with freshness, with authenticity.

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[15]Hélène Cixous, in *La venue à l'écriture,* p. 42. The quotation is my free translation of the following passage:

> Pas de loi. Pas de grammaire. De l'orthographe une fois par mois. Pas de savoir. Surtout aucun savoir. De diplôme d'écriture: aucun. Affiliation: nulle. Modèle: Point. L'infinie."

[16]Hélène Cixous, "Le rire de la Méduse," *L'Arc,* No. 61 (1975), p. 39.

[17]Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture,* 2nd ed. (Paris, 1964), pp. 10-12.

The symbolism of *The Double Hook* reinforces a religio-aesthetic withdrawal from existential time into the eternal simultaneity of essential art. But Watson goes beyond her symbolist inheritance, with its effort to make language into music, to base her fiction on an interrogation of the origins of language. In this aspect, her debt to Gertrude Stein is very real, though less commented on.[18] Although I do not propose to make explicit comparisons between Stein and Watson, it will be evident that the techniques Watson uses for changing our perception of language through emphasis on its rhythmical functions are derived from Stein's earlier experiments. Like Stein, Watson has used the current coin of language, the commonplaces of speech, and injected new material from popular art forms into literature. Her basic concern is with the forms of language, even the sounds of words. In all cases readers are invited to think deeply about the absurd conventionalities they hear. And from Stein too comes reinforcement for Watson's awareness of "political space." The "anarchic breaking up and rebuilding of sleepy familiar words and phrases"[19] is a result less of time than of space, originating in her acute sense of "woman's particular (alienated) way of seeing."

As I have suggested, Watson's exploration of language takes two forms. First she tries to develop a universal language from a number of different modes of discourse, all of which, however, are ritual forms of speech hardened into cliché in the modern world. One of Watson's aims is to try to ignite some of the fossilized psychic energy to be found in the cliché. (I am using the terms developed by her husband Wilfrid Watson in his dialogues with Marshall McLuhan in their work on *From Cliché to Archetype.*)[20] While not as exhaustive as Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pecuchet* or his *Dictionnaire des idées réçus, The Double Hook* is an inventory of ritual ways of expression detached from their original emotional and spiritual meaning. Burdened by the wastes of time, the cultural shards and rubbish of the past, Watson uses this discordant variety of styles to produce sounds not previously heard in high Canadian culture. The cult of the cliché attacks the tastes of both bourgeois and proletariat. Sensitive always to the thinness and inarticulateness of modern language, Watson seeks in other ways to disturb the reader's conventional consciousness of words and their so-called corresponding realities and compels the reader to enter a realm of aesthetic possibilities and values foreign to his experience in his practical reality. In this second disruptive development, beginning with a dislocation of the ordinary lexical meanings of words, Watson explores their musical and

[18]On a visit to York University about 1973, Sheila Watson, in reply to a question stimulated by a reading she gave from *The Double Hook,* said she had read Stein a lot. Public recognition of Watson's revolutionary qualities was given by bp Nichol on another occasion at York when Nichol acknowledged Watson as one of his "revolutionary" mentors along with Reaney, Bissett, and Birney. He then analyzed their interest in minimal language — sound and shape — without referring to Watson again.

[19]Watson, "Gertrude Stein: The Style is the Machine," p. 171.

[20]See Wilfrid Watson, "Marshall McLuhan and Multiconsciousness: The Place Marie Dialogues," *Boundary 2,* 3, No. 1 (Fall 1974), 197-211.

visual properties, moving into silence when the "light" has been born into the world and the meanings of minimal language exhausted.

In simulating a universal language, Watson signals her departure from realistic verisimilitude in preference of abstraction. Since they have been discussed elsewhere,[21] its composite elements may be detailed briefly, although — because the fact that Watson's subject is language itself has not been generally recognized — the allusions and echoes have been interpreted literally without taking into account the complex ironies and word play involved.

One level of narrative and allusions refers to the mythological trickster god, Coyote, of the Thompson Indian tribe of which Kip is a member and the Potter family are descendants. All the community lives "Under Coyote's eyes," but belief in the religion that he represents, like practice in the Indian language, is minimal. Kip and old Mrs. Potter are tricked by Coyote: Ara's vision of a vengeful god (p. 77) mirrors Coyote. Although Watson has made use of the belief that Coyote is a mediating god, a helper to the Old Man, to structure her narrative and to show the movement within the community to greater wisdom, she allows only fragments of this myth to be retained by the community. No meaningful pattern of culture exists. In Mrs. Potter we see that significance becomes sterile and fossilized; in Kip we observe it turn to self-annihilating violence as symbolized by his blindness.

Co-existent with these fragments of meaning is the biblical narrative and mythology, which, it has been suggested, is the basis of Watson's style.[22] Certainly, the genealogies of *The Double Hook* are reminiscent of those of the book of Genesis.[23] Ara's comments echo the pattern of question and answer common in the Psalms.[24] The setting of *The Double Hook* with its minimum of physical detail takes on a generalized, more abstract significance when paralleled with the "Valley of dry bones" from Ezekiel.[25] Throughout the fiction, one may detect rhythms and images from the books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Juxtaposed to the narratives from the American Indians, they suggest the complex origins of this Métis community. Their interrelationship is most intricate and ironic in the figure of

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[21]Leslie Monkman, "Coyote as Trickster," *Canadian Literature,* No. 52 (Spring 1972), pp. 70-76.

[22]Mitchell, "Association and Allusion in *The Double Hook,*" p. 64. I would suggest that this is only *one* of the sources.

[23]See p. 19 of the novel, and compare p. 13.

[24]"It's not for fish, she fishes, Ara thought. There's only three of them. They can't eat all the fish she'd catch."

[25]See Mitchell, p. 64. Ezekiel 37: 4 - 5, for example, "Again he said to me, Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the world of the LORD. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." Compare Ara on p. 35: "A stone breathed in her hand."

Coyote from whose mouth issue phrases echoing Jeremiah or Isaiah.[26] Together the two traditions move us towards universal meaning, but in their present fragmentary state, half-forgotten, they represent the chaos of the community, its corpse under the mound of cliché.

Watson's layering of different cultural patterns of narrative and language resembles the painter's collage. Another colourful strand adding new meanings is the traditional European one, revealed most explicitly in the utterances of the immigrant bound to her past, the Widow Wagner. Clutching her watch, a relic of the mechanistic world from which she has come, the Widow cries automatically "Dear God" (pp. 71 and 55), calling on a figure who seems distant from this world. Her speech is more disjointed, more mechanical, more materialistic and object-centred than that of other characters, but they too respond to difficult experiences with stock answers. Most notable are Felix's riddles ("Can your joy be bound by a glass river? Is death a fishbone in your hand?" [p. 72]), and Angel's proverbs: "A woman sharpens herself to endure. Since she can be trod on like an egg, she grows herself to stone" (p. 123).[27] William too speaks in proverbs frequently: "There's never just one wasp in a wasp's nest," he says (p. 83). For every crisis, William has a ready-made explanation, one that often by its indirection points to his lack of perception. Ara comments pertinently on this ignorance

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[26]See Mitchell, pp. 67-68, and compare p. 24 of the novel,

> In my mouth is the east wind.
> Those who cling to the rocks I will
> bring down
> I will set my paw on the eagle's nest,

to Jeremiah 49: 16:

> Thy terribleness hath deceived thee, and the pride of thine heart, O thou that dwellest in the cleft of the rock, that holdest the height of the hill: though thou shouldest make thy nest as high as the eagle, I will bring thee down from thence, saith the Lord.

Compare p. 98 of the novel,

> To gather briars and thorns,
> said Coyote.
> To go down into the holes of the rock
> and into the caves of the earth.
> In my fear is peace,

to Isaiah 2: 17-19:

> And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.

[27]See also Angel's remark on p. 86, "One man is one man and two men or ten men aren't something else. One board is one board"; Ara's on p. 74, "You can't tidy up people the way you can tidy up a room"; and William's on p. 113, "A hammer never hits once, he said. It gets the habit of striking."

camouflaged as wisdom when he actually once admits his lack of knowledge (p. 75), thus underlining the difficulties of the community that arise from their inability to see clearly. While they are bound by traditional formulaic responses, their clichés are capable of generating more meaning than those of the townsfolk James encounters with their "Business is business. A joke's a joke. A place for everything and everything in its place" (p. 96). Here is speech at its thinnest — tautological, noncommunicative. To underline the mindless absurdity of this rote repetition, Watson introduces the talking parrot. Parodying the humans, he offers a hospitality as empty as that of the townsfolk who will keep to their place and not help James (p. 100). "Drinks on you, it said. Drinks all round." The phrase "it said" points to the alienated nature of cliché. There is no distinctive human feature to speech that is not shared by the parrot, a fact which disconcerts the characters. In the speech of the bird, we find an objective correlative of the cultural insensibility of this community as revealed through its limited language.

Because of its generally stereotyped nature, language constitutes a problem for Watson. How or where can she find words with more potential as vehicles of meaning? This problem is dramatized in the figure of Felix who Watson has suggested is the centre of affirmation in the book. Felix, whose name suggests the "felix culpa" or happy fall that led to Christ's presence in the world, is, of course, the vehicle for the Christian message of love and action that eventually animates the community. Felix becomes the ox kneeling by the manger (p. 126). He also speaks the language of catholicity, an earlier universal language, now too reduced to formulaic cliché (pp. 51 and 68). As none of the other characters is, Felix is aware of his inability to communicate. In his personal crisis, when he realizes that he has no words, that all is silence, Felix announces the central theme of the book: a concern with the act of writing as the actual reality of the moment, metalanguage, which opens up the disintegrative possibilities of language. As he searches for words, sounds pour forth devoid of all sense for him. Their meaning has been forgotten. These words have once been a means of expressing truth, and, ironically, they are still denotatively dense for the reader.

> He wondered: If a bitch crept in by my stove would I let her fall on the hot iron of it? I've got no words to clear a woman off my bench. No words except: keep moving, scatter, get-the-hell-out.
>
> His mind sifted ritual phrases. Some half forgotten. You're welcome. Put your horse in. Pull up. *Ave Maria. Benedictus fructus ventris. Introibo.*
>
> Introibo. The beginning. The whole thing to live again. Words said over and over here by the stove. His father knowing them by heart. God's servants. The priest's servants. The cup lifting. The bread breaking. *Domine non sum dignus.* Words coming. The last words.
>
> He rolled from his chair. Stood barefoot. His hands raised.
>
> *Pax vobiscum,* he said. (p. 51)

In his search for the right word, it is purely ironic that Felix's phrase of

greeting, that of the Angel announcing Christ's birth to Mary, is appropriate for the arrival of the pregnant Lenchen. The problem with language has not been resolved for him, since he does not fully understand the meaning of these words in a foreign language. For him, "to speak has no connection with the reality of things," though it does for Watson at this point. In Felix's utterances, we see how Watson has generated meaning for clichés by juxtaposing one against the other. By her selection and placing of words, she has refreshed them for us. But language still remains a problem for her as it does for Felix. An affirmative vision cannot be expressed in her native language. She must move from English to Latin to communicate her hope. Later, as we shall see, she must move beyond language to action, light and music, to express the central ordering principle of her linguistic universe. Latin is the prelude to silence.

In Felix's questioning the nature of language has been revealed Watson's attitude to reality as something not to be imitated but to be analyzed and her consequent treatment of language as an autotelic rather than representational entity. Nevertheless, the more experimental aspects of Watson's language begin in naturalism. One of the more disconcerting elements of *The Double Hook* is its abstraction, the elimination or condensation of detailed external description fixing the appearances and relationships of people and things. Instead, Watson has used different types of ritual speech to characterize individuals. Like Gertrude Stein, Watson is becoming a receiver, listening to voices speaking, recording the idiosyncracies of speech. She thus acknowledges that the only linguistic reality is the individual speech act, that other categories are abstractions useful for classifying but giving no insight into language. The result has been a collage of dead languages that, in this new context, have been given fresh meaning. Watson is attempting to free language from the burden of the past, by the process clearly spelled out in Felix's struggle to "remember" "half-forgotten phrases" as he waits for the coming of the "Word" that will free the community from the past, metaphorically suggested in the haunting presence of Mrs. Potter, the revenant. Salvation for the village folk from the dead weight of language that stultifies the community will come only when Ara's vision is accomplished and life comes from inanimate forms. "A stone *breathed* in her hand. Life drained to its centre" (p. 35). The writer's challenge that Watson undertakes is to revitalize this corpse, language. This she does essentially, as Ara does, by changing our perception of old words, by changing their context or the rhythm of our comprehending them.

To exhibit words afresh and to dissociate them from a conventional context and stale association and then to display them with more of their power and capacity for vibration — more, in short, of their being — is Watson's aim. It is her great poetic gift to make words vibrate. But her work to conserve and restore the language involves few neologisms, few examples of Canadian diction, though one does exist — "kinnikinic bushes"

(p. 129). Most frequently techniques of condensation and dislocation are used to cut words away from their habitual denotations. We see this condensation at work in the spare descriptions. Much concrete imagery is employed evolving a symbolic shorthand. But the art of "dépouillement" is aided by other techniques of generalization and abstraction, such as the excessive use of indefinite pronouns, as we see in the following passage:

> Roads went from *this* to *that.* But the hill led up to the pines and on to the rock rise which flattened out and fell off to *nowhere* on the other side. (italics mine, p. 33)

The closed space of the valley created by the encircling hills is an important symbolic concept in this story of death and rebirth (tomb, womb), a concept reinforced here linguistically. Stopping to ponder over the lexical reference of these ambiguous pronouns, the reader is caught in a parallel closed space.

At other points the rhythm of reading is speeded up by the dislocating and condensing techniques of ellipsis[28] and incomplete sentences.[29] This latter device is the more frequent and results from Watson's punctuation practice. Some examples of aberrant punctuation were "normalized" by the editors, as a comparison with the first page of the manuscript of *The Double Hook* reveals.[30] The substitution of the period for the comma remains a feature throughout the book, creating a longer pause in the line. While this may have begun in response to Watson's listening to the halting speech rhythms of her inarticulate characters, it has transcended this naturalistic origin in the musical pattern of the sentences created. But we shall return to Watson's interest in language as music later. Watson's dislocation of syntax has caused thought to come more rapidly than words and thus involved the reader actively in the creative process, filling in the gaps in the sentences. By manipulating time within the sentences through her style, Watson has slowed down or distorted the ordinary syntactical movement so that within these paragraphs she has approximated the "stillpoint within which there is movement" towards which the entire text is moving, as the narrative quest

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[28]See p. 55:

> Father of the fatherless. Judge of widows. Death, and after death the judgement.
>
> She opened the door.
>
> Heinrich, she called. Heinrich.
>
> All round the animals waited. The plate on the table. The knife. The fork. The kettle boiling on the stove.
>
> Dear God, she said. The country. The wilderness. Nothing. Nothing but old women waiting.

[29]See p. 35:

> Overhead the sky was tight as rawhide. About them the bars of the earth darkened. The flat ribs of the hills.

[30]See *Open Letter,* Third Series, No. 1 (Winter 1974-75), pp. 185-86.

leads from stasis to action while the language evolves from cliché to the Logos, the Word within the word, the speechless child.

This tension of past and process is developed in the words of the first page of the text. Here we first encounter the hesitant speech of the inhabitants of the valley with its common syntax: subject-verb-object. But within this simple pattern there is room for much variation, for, as we have seen, each character has a unique way of expressing himself. Within the work these different styles are held together by the narrator who at times approximates their speech, at others expresses their inarticulate thoughts in the very language they would use were they able to express the thought themselves.[31] One striking example of this is the opening passage where the confrontation of Greta, James, and their mother is registered in terms of verb tenses — Mrs. Potter is associated with the past tense, the children (and God) with the present participle:

> Greta was at the stove. Turn*ing* hotcakes. Reach*ing* for the coffee beans. Grind*ing* away James's voice.
>
> James was at the top of the stairs. His hand half-raised. His voice in the rafters.
>
> James walk*ing* away. The old lady fall*ing*. There under the jaw of the roof. In the vault of the bed loft. Into the shadow of death. Pushed by James's will. By James's hand. By James's words: This *is* my day. *You'll* not fish today.
>
> Still the old lady fished. If the reeds *had dried* up and the banks *folded* and *crumbled* down she *would have fished* still. If God *had come* into the valley, come hold*ing* out the long finger of salvation, moan*ing* in the darkness, thunder*ing* down the gap at the lake head, skimm*ing* across the water, dry*ing* up the blue signature like blotting-paper, ask*ing* where, ask*ing* why, defy*ing* an answer, she *would have* thrown her line against the rebuke; she *would have* caught a piece of mud and looked it over; she *would have* drawn a line with the barb when the fire of righteousness baked the bottom. (italics mine, pp. 19-20.)

All we need to know about the characters is given in the verbs: Greta's passive presence is indicated in the present participle, James's aggression in the imperative "You'll not," and Mrs. Potter's resistance in the past tense, while her death is indicated to the reader in the conditional antecedent.

But there is more than thematic significance in the use of verbs in this passage. We find here one of the most important of Watson's means of effecting a change in our sensitivity to language, her use of repetition, which

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[31] See pp. 20-21:

> William would try to explain, but he couldn't. He only felt, but he always felt he knew. He could give half a dozen reasons for anything. When a woman on his route flagged him down with a coat and asked him to bring back a spool of thread from the town below, he'd explain that thread has a hundred uses. When it comes down to it, he'd say, there's no telling what thread is for. I knew a woman once, he'd say, who used it to sew up her man after he was throwed on a barbed-wire fence.

alters our experience of duration. The repetition of the "ing" ending has an incantatory effect as the rhythm rushes forward and then is brought to a halt by a period, moving off again in a sequence continually repeated. Watson's predilection for the present is a result of her listening to ordinary speech. But it is also a stylistic element with philosophical implications. Here we have another approximation of the "still point within which there is movement," for the participle captures not only the present moment of time, but also the process wherein the present is an accumulation of moments that have preceded it. This technique has its origins, I suspect, in Gertrude Stein, with a similar result.[32] Time has become a plastic element that can be manipulated at will, as it is in music. Significantly, passages in which this extensive repetition occurs are frequently (like those just mentioned) ones of heightened experience: James is killing his mother; Ara sees Mrs. Potter's ghost (p. 20). It would seem that ordinary syntax is too thin and inadequate for describing such emotional events, and Watson resorts to musical notation instead.

Another type of repetition, anaphora, is used in the genealogies:

> In the folds of the hills
> under Coyote's paw
> lived
> the old lady, mother of William
> of James and of Greta
> lived James and Greta
> lived William and Ara his wife
> lived the Widow Wagner
> the Widow's girl Lenchen
> the Widow's boy
> lived Felix Prosper and Angel
> lived Theophil
> and Kip
> until one morning in July[33]

Through the use of front rhyme, the poetic effects of these passages are emphasized. Watson has also set them apart from the text visually by spacing them carefully at a margin inset from the margin of prose. Other similar passages are used for Coyote's statements.[34] The alternating of poetry and prose also fulfils a disruptive function, slowing down our perception of the text by demanding changes in our pace of reading. Moreover, the recurrence of these "poetic" passages throughout the text reveals Watson's delight in variation through modulation as an organiza-

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[32]Watson's work on Wyndham Lewis has made her familiar with his fulminations against the "time-children" (chap. 12 of *Time and Western Man*), foremost among them Gertrude Stein. Although Watson has created her own equivalent of the still centre of the vortex, it owes much to this lesson of the continuous present learned from Stein.

[33]This is copied from the manuscript as printed on p. 185 of the special Watson issue of *Open Letter*. See also the genealogies on pp. 34 and 92 of *The Double Hook*.

[34]See pp. 35 and 134 of *The Double Hook*.

tional principle. The cumulative effect of repetition develops increasing density. Each one in the succession repeats all the characteristics of the previous one with a very slight addition of some sort, until a radical break may be made and the underlying principle of order in the Logos be found. This effect of repetition, where both quantity and density of perception are changed, operates in individual passages, as we see in the genealogies or the following passage from Ara's vision: "Ara felt death leak*ing* through from the centre of the earth. Death ris*ing* to the knee. Death ris*ing* to the loin." (Here the increase in anxiety makes the second rising qualitatively different from the first.) On a greater scale, repetition also orders the structure of the texts. The reiterated symbolism of the four elements is one such structural pattern of modulation. Another is the repetition of key words (and thematic constellations) functioning as musical *leitmotifs.*

I propose to explore two of these major words to see how Watson has made them vibrate and changed our awareness and understanding of them. One *leitmotif* involves the repetition of "things" in different contexts, another that of the word "glory." Both words illustrate the abstracting process language undergoes when it is subjected to analysis. The repeated words are indefinite or abstract nouns, given precise but varying meanings through their context. The first appearance of the word in each case strikes a main thematic note:

> She's in the house. I'm not having any*thing* to do with that sort of *thing,* one way or another. (italics mine, p. 27)

Here Heinrich's refusal to be a messenger links "things" to the death-like wish for noninvolvement in the community. Moreover, both by his refusal to be more explicit in naming the act he will not condone and by the association with the negative in "not anything," this word becomes a sign of the linguistic poverty of the people, ultimately signifying their alienation, or, more precisely, their reification. Later this negation is reinforced when the boy puts back the fence, telling Kip there is "nothing" else he can do when the stallion has broken his fence. "Thing" here is not an object but an abstraction, a substitute for zero. This meditation on the void is continued by the Widow Wagner:

> Dear God, she said, the country. *Nothing* but dust. *Nothing* but old women fishing. What can a person do? Wagner and me were cousins. I came, and what I could I brought. I've *things* for starting a girl. *Things* belonging in my family for years. *Things* laid by. The spoons. The sheets. The bedcover I crocheted with my own hands. The shame. A fat pig of a girl, Almighty Father. Who would want such a girl?
>
> I could tell you, the girl said.
>
> You can tell me *nothing,* the Widow said. Go. Go. I hear *nothing.* I see *nothing*. . . . (italics mine, p. 29)

Here the objects denoted by things are enumerated, but the meaning of the word "things" is greater than the sum of the spoons and bedcovers. For

these objects illuminate the Widow's materialism. They also symbolize her attachment to Europe and its traditions, for the "things" have come with her, and the country where, alienated, she is living is to her a negation of all these cherished objects. They also refer to all the traditions of marriage, evoked by the trousseau, which, because of Lenchen's recklessness in becoming pregnant, have been negated. But the "nothing" cried out by the Widow suggests her unwillingness to accept reality, to acknowledge the fact of Lenchen's pregnancy. The condensation of the text, the ellipses, aid in the accretion of meaning. This passage becomes ironic when it is contrasted to Lenchen's later statement to Kip — "Girl's don't have *things* to give. I've got *nothing* of my own" (p. 62) — that refers directly back to the Widow's disinheriting Lenchen, but carries the additional meaning of sexuality in the context. Girls are not possessions Lenchen asserts and then avows that she has lost her virginity.

Throughout the early sections of the text, this play on thing-nothing is maintained. Nowhere is it more evident than in the punning reference to Ara's vision of Mrs. Potter's ghost where she is told "You've been seeing *things,* Ara," or in the contrast between men's and women's definition of things developed by Lenchen, or in William's pronouncement about things and death: "There's enough *things* half-cocked in life, he said, without scrambling out of it any which way" (p. 52). That the intangibility of objects is a consequence of their invisibility, the result of faulty perception, is suggested in one of the rare passages where Watson pushes the contextual variations to the point of semantic illogic: "Sometimes when the eye's open a *thing* walks right in and sits down" (p. 56). The personification of "thing" reinforces the theme of alienation and of cultural poverty, since the lexical error passes unobserved, uncorrected. Again this element of perception is emphasized in "There are *things* one needs from time to time. There are *things* people think other people need that no one needs at all" (p. 41). Repetition here accentuates the fact that the meaning of the word is relative to the person using it. The gap between words and objects, between feelings and words, is brought into focus. Through this meditation on the connotations of things, Watson unfolds the problem of language. We may trace the movement of the fiction through the changing meanings of the word. As isolation and alienation give way to action and fellowship, as Felix finds words, though they be half-forgotten, "things" disappears from the text. When it recurs one last time in the final passages, its meaning has changed. No longer does it imply denial, alienation; now it suggests the hope of new beginnings, the generation of new meanings after the coming of the word, here "in the first pasture of *things*." "Things" now refers to time, to that moment recaptured through the returning circle. Pointing to the possibility of creation, the word itself has been a factor in generating a new perception of language. It has renewed literary language by introducing a new low level of speech.

"Glory" is another word given such fresh life through punning and word-play from its use as a *leitmotif*. Its ultimate thematic importance is confirmed in the final meaning attributed to the word when James recalls his running away because "Kip had been playing round with the *glory* of the world" (p. 132). Kip has been playing with Coyote, a god. He has also been baiting Lenchen with the yellow hair. This echo of "glory" as used in Chapter 60 of Isaiah to refer to God's promise of protection to the nation of Israel[35] is applicable by extension to James's child, Felix, whom Lenchen has been carrying and who will be the Messiah figure for this community. In its many occurrences in the text, "glory" retains the biblical connotations of golden light and promised salvation. There are fewer *double* and *triple entendre* than with "things," but Watson plays with the syntax of the word, using this abstraction as though it were a concrete noun. One might substitute "sun" for "glory" in the following case:

> He went out of the kitchen into the sun. Outside the world floated like a mote in a straight shaft of *glory*. (p. 26)

Repetition and two unusual lexical usages of "glory" make another passage particularly arresting, focusing our attention closely on the word:

> That Greta, he thought. Standing there proud like the *glory*. Fitting herself into a *glory* the way a man fits himself into a shirt and pants. (p. 64)

Particularly disconcerting is the suggestion that "glory" is both a piece of clothing and a person.

In fact, our attention has been focussed on this word by the epigraph to the fiction that has been taken from Kip's reflections:

> He doesn't know you can't catch the *glory* on a hook and hold on to it. That when you fish for the *glory* you catch the darkness too. That if you hook the *glory* you hook twice the fear. That Coyote plotting to catch the *glory* for himself is fooled and every day fools others. He doesn't know, Kip thought, how much mischief Coyote can make.
>
> Coyote reaching out reflected *glory*. Like a fire to warm. . . . (p. 61)

When compared to a fish, "glory" suggests a relationship with Christ, which is emphasized again in the false glory, the fire of Coyote, the anti-Christian god. "Glory," though, is light and cannot be caught like a fish or an animal. It is the light of the world sought by characters and author alike, the light of the world that is its ordering principle. And the "glory," as we have seen, comes in the person of the speechless child, Felix. The ordering principle is beyond

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[35]See Isaiah 60: 1: "glory of the Lord is risen upon thee"; 60:19: "but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light and thy God thy glory"; and 62: 3: "Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord."

words.[36] Here again we reach the limits of language. The affirmative vision Watson proposes lies beyond the capabilities of expression in the language we use, even when to our simple vocabularies is added a wealth of connotations from half-forgotten languages.

Felix's affirmations lead Watson beyond English into Latin. Love and harmony, the beginnings of community and culture, are experienced in terms of action and light, in the form of the birth of a speechless child. Silence falls. Light reigns. Dissatisfied with the minimal forms of our common usage of syntax, Watson's prose, while employing them, seeks to dissociate itself and moves towards musical form. Though there is silence, there is also meaning and purpose. The word does not end in nothingness (as in the works of Beckett, for instance). *The Double Hook* moves beyond the frontiers of language into other modes of statement — light, music. Where speech fails, Watson is at the point of awareness of a transcendent presence in the world, the Logos which validates the word. Here is the "still centre," the origin of language, the Word within the word whose coming has been awaited.

Since the publication of *The Double Hook,* Watson has entered another sort of silence, for she has written no other fiction. The problem of language has become more pressing. Has Watson succumbed to despair over the possibilities of expression open to the culturally deprived? Has she seen the situation of the Canadian and the woman as one of increasing alienation? I would suggest that this is not the case. Rather, Watson's silence is both consequence and proof of her transitional role in Canadian and female writing. Watson has not addressed the phenomenon of her cultural alienation directly, but through the objective correlative of the Indians. She has thus not articulated the problem as cogently as younger writers, such as Dennis Lee and Nicole Brossard, have done. A comparison with this latter writer is helpful in defining Watson's position. Brossard's aim too is "de-creative." She has written in opposition to dominant literary myths and forms, those concerning female creativity, to propose an alternate feminist mythology. Brossard moves from silence into the text to assert that women must express the reality of their lives not contained in myth, a direction which takes her in the opposite way to Watson's movement into silence. For Brossard literature is a form of reality. There is no transcendent meaning. She has made great use of ellipsis and puns to dislocate syntax and disrupt lexical meaning. Her texts provide a radical commentary on the rules of grammar but within the limits of language, whereas Watson moves beyond

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[36]Another pattern of puns and word-play focusses on the word "know." On pp. 25-26 "know" is used in its biblical sense as a euphemism for sexual relations and in its more common sense of mastering a skill. As well, the popular misuse of the word "learn" for teach is introduced as a variant on the idea of exchanging knowledge. This passage combines different levels of language; it also contains many *double-entendre,* for instance, when the sexual connotations of know are transferred to learn, which replaces teach.

language into music. Even in her exploration of this dimension of writing, Watson has not gone as far as younger writers like bp Nichol in exploring the musical potentialities of language in more minimal forms, sounds, and phonemes. Nevertheless, *The Double Hook* is a predecessor of such experimental writing, and in the very act of making the medium of her art her subject, by exploring the coming of the word, Watson belongs in this company of revolutionaries.

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