REREADING STEAD'S GRAIN

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As Leslie Mundwiler argues in a recent article ("Robert Stead: Home in the First Place"), the criticism of Robert Stead's fiction has been limited by an unstated assumption that a "faithfulness to reality is the main claim of Stead's work on our attention."[1] In some instances, Mundwiler notes, the assumption has been made during an attempt to identify Stead as a "realist" (Pacey)[2]; in others it has underpinned thematic readings of Stead's novels as fictionalized accounts of social and economic history (Elder)[3]. Mundwiler's article itself is a curious piece in that he devotes much of his space to detailing Stead's personal involvement in various public debates — the wisdom of government control of the grain industry, the effectiveness of Canadian copyright law, the hazards of monopoly-capitalism, the ominous penetration of U.S. monopoly into the Canadian economy, the tenuous future of Canadian books and magazines in a book industry increasingly dominated by U.S. publications — and yet argues finally that meaningful criticism must move past such details of his life and times to focus on "the concrete articulation of [the] narrative itself" and on "the active mythic force of language":

> Our response to novelistic narrative, which may be ignored in the process of assimilating the novel to scientific categories or platitudes, may challenge the very rules by which we expected to find it meaningful.[4]

As a textual experience, Stead's best-known novel, *Grain,* is extraordinarily ambiguous indeed. Certainly it provides at times a strong sense of "realism," but it provides so much in addition that realism is in no way its central effect. The opening chapters take us quite another way. We are aware primarily of someone speaking,

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[1]*Essays on Canadian Writing,* No. 11 (Summer 1978), p. 198.
[2]"Fiction 1930-1940," in *Literary History of Canada,* ed. Carl F. Klinck et al, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), II, 186-88.
[3]"Western Panorama: Settings and Themes in Robert J. C. Stead," *Canadian Literature,* No. 17 (Summer 1963), pp. 44-56.
[4]Mundwiler, p. 199.

someone aloof and sardonic — a narrator, but one more concerned with presenting himself impressively than with objective narration. He has a story, and characters for this story, but is he interested in these characters or merely in displaying his own learning and wit by juxtaposing them to the characters?

> The eleventh of April, 1896, is not generally known as a date of special significance, yet it was on that day, or, to be more exact, that night, that the hero of this narrative made his entry into a not overhospitable world. Perhaps the term hero, with its suggestion of high enterprise, sits inappropriately upon the chief character of a somewhat commonplace tale; there was in Gander Stake little of that quality which is associated with the clash of righteous steel or the impact of noble purposes. Yet that he was without heroic fibre I will not admit, and you who bear with me through these pages shall judge whether or not the word is wholly unwarranted.[5]

Indeed, if we do bear with this voice and this narration, it is its own narcissism that has engaged us — its awareness of its own authority, its sense of personal superiority to the characters it is presenting, its pleasure in language skills beyond the reach of these characters, its amusement at the seriousness with which they regard their ostensibly minor lives:

> If he took note of his surroundings beyond the wooden cradle in which he lay, the arms in which he was lifted, the rounded founts from which he drew his nutriment, he must have marvelled at the habitation which Fate had selected for his home. To him at first it would seem very big, although his mother found it inconveniently small, and filled with equipment of amazing variety and interest. (p. 17)

The "high" language of these chapters — "special significance," "hero," "high enterprise," "righteous," "noble," "nutriment" — implies a standard of judgement separate from the characters and events to which the narrator bears witness; cumulatively it operates as a critique of the characters which limits any identification with them. It is a language which excludes and judges them; they are privy neither to its vocabulary nor to the values the vocabulary signifies — a fact which Stead remarks on himself in the fourth chapter. Again speaking of the main character, young Gander Stake, the narrator says:

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[5]New Canadian Library (1926; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), p. 15. Cited hereafter by page numbers in parentheses.

> He knew more than any of his teachers about the profession by which he was to make his livelihood, and he regarded book-learning as non-essential and irrelevant — neither of which words he would have understood. (p. 40)

But these words are necessarily ones which both the reader and the narrator understand. This linguistic bond draws the reader into an identification with the narrator — a narrator whose presence is indicated only by the language he uses — and not with characters whom this language appears to invest with realistic detail of action, reflection, and dialogue.

Yet this narrator does know the life of the pioneer farm, the speech habits of his "commonplace" characters, the interiors of farm buildings:

> With an unreasoning disregard for the fitness of things, the early settlers always made use of shingle nails half an inch too long for the boards into which they were driven. It was the only shingle nail they knew, and that every nail should protrude through the board, splintering off a fragment at its end, they accepted as inevitable very much as they accepted early sunrise in summer and late sunrise in winter. In frosty weather each of these nail-ends became a condensing point for the household vapours, and a thousand little globules of ice formed in rows between the poplar rafters, dripping a little when the heat from the stove overpowered the cold at the other end of the nail, and recovering their losses through the long, crackling night. (p. 18)

But are these the objectivities of realism? Again Stead declares the narrator's superior perspective, attributing to the characters "an unreasoning disregard for the fitness of things." Again the diction and syntax are removed from the place they describe; the narrator's perspective eclipses the view of the Stake family of their own farm and encompasses all of pioneer life. The Stakes stand here as representative of "the early settlers": the rafters, the stove, the "crackling night" are typical rather than particular; despite the detail, we are conscious not of standing close to the matter of the novel, as in realism, but further back with the narrator in a specifically developing viewpoint.

The exact nature of this viewpoint becomes slowly visible in these opening chapters, and is articulated not in the rhetoric of the narrative but in its imagery. It begins on the second page when Stead first attends to the animals and land-forms among which Gander

begins to grow. By the end of this page, the characters themselves are linked to animal life:

> Gander was utterly selfish. . . . If he thought of his father at all he no doubt regarded him as an enormous, shaggy, but not dangerous animal, given at times to . . . unseemly curiosity concerning his — Gander's — toes, hair, and absence of teeth. The suspension bridge of scalp across a chasm in his little skull was a matter of concern to this great animal. (pp. 16-17)

As soon as Gander can crawl, Stead follows him to the farmyard where Gander's true parents and siblings appear to be the farm animals — which Stead presents to us somewhat less condescendingly than he has the characters:

> He was fond of horses. He wandered among their feet at the peril of his life, but without mishap from that source. He was the foster-child of the family collie, Queenie, in whom he confided all his troubles and who was usually the first to locate him when he wandered too far from home. He hated geese, having had a disasterous encounter with that masculine bully of the farmyard from whom he was afterwards to derive his appellation; but he admired the turkey-gobbler, who strutted around with his tail spread until it scraped along the earth and his bulbing blood-red neck threatening instant apoplexy. . . . Ducks he loved. He would sit by the duck pond for hours watching them turn tail-up as they grubbed among the grassy roots, or filtering juicy morsels out of the water through their broad, chattery bills. With hens he had little concern. He regarded them somewhat as a small boy regards girls, as objects of slight interest and no possible importance. He liked his mother, tolerated his father, and hated his brother Jackson. But he loved Queenie. (p. 20)

Gander's affinity with animals, and his implicit lack of affinity with humans, comes to us in numerous later passages. Interestingly, as the importance of the animals grows in Gander's life, the intrusions of the condescending narrator become fewer. Gander and the other children rush into their schoolhouse " 'the way they load steers at the stockyard' " (p. 31); at home Gander is "no more lonely on these prairies than is the coyote or the badger" (p. 56); at church "his voice, unruly as any prairie broncho, plunged and bucked into unexpected and involuntary cadenzas." When his voice goes "honking off over the heads of the congregation" (p. 66), he acquires his nickname Gander. The "broncho" image of Gander

engages Stead elsewhere when he describes the father as being "too wise a driver to let this colt feel the rein" (p. 59), when he remarks that Gander's nickname is "as much his as though it had been branded on him with iron" (p. 84), and when mid-way through the novel he tells of Gander's becoming "more than ever a creature of his father's farm" finding "companionship with his horses and machinery" (p. 134).

By the sixth chapter the narrator is no longer a personality; Gander meanwhile has grown in definition — a "groping," pre-conscious, instinctual boy who has become sufficiently significant to the narrator to be written about directly, without irony or implied value judgment. Both the tone and situation are clearly more serious. Stead has shifted from mocking Gander to respecting him, and respecting him it seems because of his enmeshment in the ancient and unconscious patterns of biological process. The impression the language creates is that natural process has a dignity which is beyond mockery — whereas the Stake family's approximations of learning and "heroism" do not:

> His mind was groping into new experiences, instinctively, but blindly. . . . (p. 63)

> . . . Gander's attitude toward Jo was too ill-defined to admit of very clear thinking. At school they had played together, preferring each other by some law of natural selection which neither understood nor tried to explain. (p. 104)

The allusion to Darwinian "law" in the second passage can scarcely be innocent, coupled with additional references to Gander's difficulty with "clear thinking" and understanding. Passages showing Gander in instinctual, reflexive responses now rise to our notice: earlier passages in which he suffered from maternal absence and diffidence, as when he "resented his mother's lack of enthusiasm" at his shooting his first goose (p. 28), or when she "suppressed" "whatever sentiment or concern" she had felt on his return from his first day at school (p. 39); slightly later passages in which he experiences bitter feelings of sibling rivalry toward his brother Jackie who appears to be the mother's preferred son:

> . . . he had no sympathy with her lamentations over his brother Jackie. Not that she often spoke of him; it was a name little heard in their household, but he seemed to be continually present in her mind, crowding from her life such happiness as

> she might have saved out of her drudgery. Gander thought this unreasonable. Jackie had gone — let him go. (pp. 113-14)

> . . . he disliked Jackie. In childhood Gander had been the younger son, to be cuffed and ordered about by his big brother, and it was against his nature to take orders. And he was deeply attached to his father. Now Jackie would try to worm in between — (p. 168)

The overtly Freudian character of Gander's anger toward mother and brother causes three other passages to carry particular significance. Perhaps two of these passages — relating the effect of the two hired men, Bill and Grit, on Gander's character — were written by Stead to show the influence of environment and hence a further deterministic element in Gander's life beyond biology and instinct. Certainly they are the kinds of passage that invite the assimilation to "categories" (the category here would be "naturalism") which Mundwiler decries. But their effect for a reader is to define more sharply the depth of Gander's "resentment" toward his mother and, even more important, to engage the reader's own Oedipal dramas. "It was Bill's theory that women are born to be mastered," Stead tells us, "that they recognize the master and obey him, but for those who are afraid they have only contempt" (p. 67). Almost immediately Gander receptively mulls this idea over — "Girls love to be mastered" (p. 68). Grit's ideas about women are equally hostile, but more disdainful than violent: "He regarded them from a distance, but with much quiet amusement. Women to him were like a picture show, to be looked at, laughed at, and forgotten" (p. 140). In between these masculine examples we read of Gander's reaction to the suggestion of his girlfriend Jo Burge that "better men" than he have gone to fight in the world war — a reaction that brings to our minds both Gander's anger at women and the animal imagery through which Stead has viewed him:

> Something new had broken out in Gander. She read it in his eye, in the twist of his face, in the pose of his body like an animal set to spring. A horror of fear swept her. (p. 131)

In this scene, a particularly upsetting one to the reader and one to which he attends in some detail, Jo tries to run; but Gander pursues her — "a man she never had seen before, coming with slow menacing strides across the grass. . . . Something wild had taken possession of him and egged him on in his madness." She runs

quickly, but stumbles and falls, "motionless as death . . . a tiny trickle of blood . . . making its red way across her forehead." "In genuine alarm," Stead tells us, Gander carries her to a nearby pond; alarmed he may be, but he is also curiously pleased by his newly dominant role:

> She was not light, but Ganger was strong, and in memory he never knew whether she weighed more than a feather. Her head fell back, and was swinging free; he supposed that must be uncomfortable, and perhaps dangerous, so he raised her higher, and drew one of of her limp arms about his neck. Her head now rested against his; he even could feel that trickle of blood against his cheek . . . (pp. 132-33)

The concluding ellipsis is Stead's and reinforces the erotic quality of the scene for Gander. Jo's reaction as she regains consciousness is correspondingly one of a woman assaulted:

> "Go 'way, go 'way!" she cried. "Don't touch me! Go 'way!" There was such an abhorrence in her look that Gander shrank from it.
>
> "I won't touch you," he pleaded. "But I'll help you home. You've been hurt."
>
> "Go 'way! Go 'way! I never want to see you again. I'm all right." She rose unsteadily to her feet and drew her loosened skirt about her. (p. 133)

The emphasis on "touch," "abhorrence," the "loosened skirt" makes this scene unmistakeably for us, Stead, and both characters one of symbolic rape — the classic male expression of anger against woman. The usual components of the rape fantasy — the dichotomy of strong man versus fragile woman, the eroticization of violence, and the male illusion of himself as rescuer — are all present. The last was alive in Gander when first beginning his angry chase:

> . . . even as he ran . . . he recalled that day [his first day at school] when he had rescued her, a little girl, from the prisoner's base and led her back triumphantly to safety. They had been friends then. They were friends yet. Of course they were friends. Of course.

That this is the violent man's illusion the irony of the concluding "Of course" makes clear.

These three scenes — Bill's theory, Grit's advice, and Gander's "assault" on Jo — clarify the exact range of Gander's resentment

toward his mother and the dangers it constitutes to himself and to the women he meets. Jo's response to Gander's hostility helps us to identify Bill's "theory that women are born to be mastered" as a rape theory and to alert us to similar expressions of feeling later in the book. These scenes also provide the dark face of Gander's emotions toward his mother — an anger at her diffidence that corresponds to his unrequited yearning for her attention, a desire to wound that corresponds to an equally strong desire to nurture and protect, a desire to humiliate that corresponds to a desire to be held and comforted.

Curiously, the various Freudian dramas that we have intuited in Gander's behaviour to this point have, despite their repugnant aspects, brought us very close to an identification with him. One reason for this effect is that since the sixth chapter (pp. 55-64), Stead's narrative intrusions into the text have been minimal and that our identification with a narrator has steadily weakened. In particular, we note few indications of a pejorative tone in the presentation of animal images or of family conflicts. Another reason seems to be the cumulative effect of the images and conflicts themselves and their gradual engaging of feelings similar to those of Gander in ourselves. Gander's unconscious yearnings for a mother, and his fears of emotional barrenness in women, at times pervade even the descriptions of the landscape:

> . . . the mocking tragedy of rain that threatens but does not come. It was as though the heavens flirted with the earth, arousing her hope and passion, only to draw away in cold and beautiful disdain.

Despite the sexual confusion in the pronouns of this passage, we recognize the earth's drama here as Gander's drama and the heavens — cold, flirting, disdainful — as the image he projects onto all women. Jo Burge displays the same recognition in the lines that follow:

> "I know — I know," she murmured to herself. Then her sympathy suddenly mothered him. Riding close she threw her arms about him and kissed him on the cheek: The next moment she was galloping her cattle toward their own gate. (p. 79)

The concentration of the imagery of the book on Gander and of the action of the book on his relations with women makes Gander's

feelings for Jo Burge overwhelmingly the core of *Grain* for any reader — despite the prominence given in various chapter openings to the historical forces of war and mechanization that frame the action. It is as though Stead himself, while initially believing himself to be writing a naturalistic novel of historical and biological determinism, found his own complex longings for the woman taking over the narrative — in Mundwiler's terms, found them challenging "the very rules" by which he "expected to find it meaningful." Moreover, Stead increasingly tends to see Gander's feelings as incestuous, as well as potentially violent, and to make incest, specifically, a preoccupation of the book. Chapter by chapter, Jo becomes more linked in Gander's semi-conscious awareness with both his mother and his sister Minnie. His first romantic meeting with Jo is followed at once by a night storm during which Minnie, still a child, seeks warmth and reassurance in Gander's bed. He appears abruptly to resolve to give up his courtship of Jo, and while we do intuit the connection Gander is making, Stead significantly takes care to confirm it three chapters later:

> That spark [of desire for Jo] had been quenched, or at least subdued, by his curious reaction to the trust and hero-worship of his sister Minnie during the storm that night when they were alone in the house together. Gander was not a deep psychologist, but he had been unable to escape the conclusion that Jo was Tommy's sister, just as Minnie was his sister. (p. 104)

The delay of three chapters works to make the intuition our own, rather than that of Stead's narrator. The same subtlety in another link in the incest drama occurs in chapter nineteen when Gander overhears his mother singing a lullaby to the young child Reed:

> . . . one of the lullabies she had sung to Gander twenty years before. His Adam's apple had seemed to swell unit it almost choked him at that sight. It tugged at something in his throat and whisked Joey Burge into his vision for a moment or two. (p. 167)

This is a strong moment in *Grain,* profound and moving for writer as well as reader, and again highly suggestive of the force of Stead's engagement. Why it is Joey Burge who is "whisked" by the lullaby into Gander's vision Stead leaves for us to conclude — and we do.

By chapter nineteen several more years have passed, and when Gander again meets Jo it is

> . . . no longer the child of his school days, the girl of his adolescence; this, beside him, was a woman, schooled in the responsibilities of the world, accustomed to facing difficulties without panic. She seemed to mother him now. (p. 181)

We see Gander only now catching up to insights we have had about him for most of the novel. In fact, how explicitly Jo fills the role never accepted in his life by his mother Gander is still not aware. We read the conclusion of this chapter, particularly Gander's comments on Jo's invalid husband, with tender irony:

> . . . how wise she was! She had set his mind at rest and filled his heart with a peace it had not known for years.
>
> "And she's so good to Dick," Gander commented, as he rehearsed their conversation. . . . "She's a reg'lar mother to him."
>
> A mother! Yes, that was what she was. Caring for her sick boy. But a wife? Gander wondered. (p. 183)

It is Gander's growing discomfort with such a limited and psychologically taboo relationship with women that underlies the conclusion of the novel. It is a discomfort which the reader shares, and which makes the conclusion convincing by being welcome even if not totally plausible. In these final pages we see Gander with Minnie and then with Jo; both seem psychologically his mother — one "holding him in her arms" to give him melodramatic advice (p. 204) and the other making his bed on a couch, tucking the corners "deftly into place; patting them tenderly, he may have thought" (p. 205). There can be no satisfying sexual relationship here; we have known this since Gander first made the connection between Minnie and Jo during the storm of chapter six.

There is no doubt in the final chapters what the novel is 'about'; it is about something more elemental than the issues of historical, environmental, or biological determinism that Stead earlier declared. It is about man and woman: man and mother, man and sister, man and wife. Gander's tragedy has been to be deprived of a mother by his family and later to be deprived of a woman — specifically Jo Burge — by his continued unconscious search for a mother. One senses that even in the overtly naturalistic passages about the farm and its machinery Stead himself "knew" this fact about his novel. The farm landscape is as much a maternal image as a deterministic one; Gander instinctively withdraws into it and "feeds" from it, as if from alternate parents, even in childhood:

> . . . he believed with our first parents that all the fruits of the field were given to man for his subsistence . . . . He ate the leaves of every flower of the prairie, but was particularly partial to rose leaves and the purple blooms of the so-called prairie crocus. He gnawed the bark from the toothsome red willow, and he dug up "snake" root and ate it moist and earthy as it came from its natural element. (p. 23)

> After the incident with Jo Burge, Gander became more than ever a creature of his father's farm. He ploughed and harrowed early and late, and found his companionship with his horses and machinery. From even his father and mother he withdrew as into a shell. (p. 134)

The farm machinery is sexual, rather than maternal — sexual for Gander in the excitement and energy it arouses in him, sexual for Stead also in the diction he uses to describe it:

> Gander drove up . . the binder clattering as it came. The young teamster saw his father through the corner of his eye, and his chest swelled with manly pride. Not for an instant did he deflect his attention from the job in hand. He cracked his long whip over the backs of his four bays and they went on the half-run, the binder snapping out its great sheaves of golden wheat and its drive chains singing in the hot afternoon . . . . the compressing finger came up; the cord tightened; the beak, with two threads of twine in its jaws, made its revolution, too quickly for the eye to see, and the knot was tied; the knife cut the string, and the sheaf fell on the carrier. Then the loose chatter of the packers as, the strain for a moment relieved, they thrust fresh wheat into the loop of twine left by the needle when it receded into its sheath. (p. 44)

The details here are admittedly the matter of realism, but they are relentlessly glamourized by romantic diction and breathless, accumulating syntax, as Stead moves from Gander's chest swelling "with manly pride" to the "drive chains singing," "the strain relieved," the new "thrust" of the fresh wheat into the machine. In the scenes involving Gander's stoking of Bill Power's steam-driven threshing machine, the sexual overtones are even more explicit. The machine is clearly female:

> "How's the old girl th' smorning?" Gander would say, as he raked the ash pan clean.

Gander's role is of courtship in both act and setting:

> Then came long minutes of gentle stoking, coaxing the fire to its maximum heat, and between times studying the stars or the waning moon. (p. 99)

When the machine is in full operation, it brings to both Stead's and Gander's minds an immediate comparison to Jo Burge:

> She was away! Gander let her ramble gently for a few revolutions while the exhaust beat its pleasant tattoo inside the stack, then slowly gave her more steam while he watched the quickening flywheel and knew the thrill that comes only to those who hold great power in the hollow of their hands. Jo Burge? This — this power — this mighty thing that sprang at his touch — this was life! (p. 101)

In no other relationship in the novel is Gander so confident and alive, nor does he find any other love object this nonmaternal and responsive.

That this is a limited "life" Stead was doubtless aware — witness his introducing very late in the novel the pastoral ideal represented by the marriage of Minnie and Cal, an ideal involving not only education, wisdom, and a lakeside cottage, but an adult love as well. The example of Minnie and Cal, although involving stereotyped characters and a contrived twist of plot, at least underlines for us the barrenness of Gander's relationships. It underlines it for Gander himself and awakens him to new possibilities for a man-woman relationship beyond his own bitterness and the models of either his parents or Jo and Dick Claus:

> In those days Cal and Minnie puzzled him a good deal. They were admittedly fond of each other. To be admittedly fond of a member of one's family had always been regarded by Gander Stake as a mark of weakness. (p. 188)

He cannot overcome this puzzlement, however, and, like much else before, the sight of Minnie and Cal merely triggers his reflexive consideration of the futile mother-son dream incarnate for him in Jo:

> They [Cal and Minnie] would sit and look at the sunset on the lake with something in their eyes that puzzled Gander beyond words.
>
> Perhaps it was some of these things, or all of them, that turned Gander's thoughts, in spite of himself, more and more toward Josephine Claus. (p. 189)

Gander's problem, to find a way out of this dead-end existence in which women can only be enemies or mothers and in which sexual energy can be released only in the company of a machine, seems to become Stead's problem in the closing chapters — which is a remarkable reversal considering his condescension toward Gander at the beginning of the book. Gander has evidently turned out to be more important to Stead than he believed him to be.

One idea Stead has insisted on throughout the book is that Gander is resistant to discipline — and no wonder considering Gander's early lack of confidence in his parents. Stead appears to know that one trusts authority before obeying authority and that the first authority for everyone is the mother — who here fails Gander in the matter of his first goose and leaves him to the affection of the family dog. Gander later is contemptuous of the obedient "form fours" soldiers "taking the lip of that fresh guy, and not saying a word back at him!" (p. 125); he suffers "indignation" when a young woman advises him to take a job in the city — "All he saw was her attitude of superiority" (p. 164). It seems he experiences some massive transfer of anger from his parents to any authority figure — even if she is as generous and attractive as the young woman here, Jerry Chansley. A second idea which Stead has developed is that machinery is deathly as well as romantic — the metaphor of the binder harvesting a human crop on the battlefields of World War I (pp. 45, 91, 95) severely qualifies the "romance" Gander finds in his machines and suggests the emptiness of his fascination with them. The combined association of machinery with both sexual excitement and violence further associates it for the reader with the latent violence of Gander's feelings toward women — partly because these are the only instances of genuinely violent emotions in the novel. In Jerry Chansley, Stead joins these two ideas to provide himself with a potentially hopeful conclusion. As Thomas Saunders observes in his introduction to the New Canadian Library edition, Jerry arrives too late in the book to be organic to its plot, and in this respect the conclusion is less than credible. But in terms of the two ideas above, that trust must precede discipline and that pure machinery destroys the potential richness of human life, she is a quite logical development. Further, in terms of the increasing identification of Stead with Gander throughout the novel, Jerry represents an organic development indeed. That is, the resolution of Gander's difficulties with anger and resentment toward women and of the paralysis these

difficulties impose on his life becomes in the novel an issue to which Stead personally appears to have an emotional commitment.

Jerry is unique to the novel in a number of ways — the only woman from the city, the only nonmaternal woman, the only woman to have adult expectations of Gander, the only woman who can "compete" with a machine, the only woman clearly associated with "spontaneity" and freedom.

> . . . something in that laughter had dug into strange, unused cells in his [Gander's] being. It was happy, spontaneous laughter — laughter without any ring of bitterness. When Gander laughed it always was in self-defence, as a mask behind which he could take shelter, or at the discomforture of some person or thing. Laughter was not much heard on the Stake homestead, and it nearly always was at people — not *with* them. This laughter was different, and it stirred Gander. (pp. 142-43)

Judging from the terms of the dichotomy here, Stead is stirred also. The second time we meet Jerry, it is through the windshield of Gander's car as she stands picking a flower in the grassy center of the gravel road. We find that this time Stead has opposed her not to the untrusting Stake family but to the machine itself, her true sexual rival:

> . . . Gander thrilled to the power of his car as it raced up the incline. As he swung over the top his brakes brought him up with a jerk. A few yards ahead a girl was bending over the grassy strip in the center of the trail, in the act of picking some prairie flower which had braved the hazard of many horses' feet. The nose of the car was almost touching her when it stopped. (p. 146)

For author and reader, this is an overtly symbolic scene — Gander's car, his "thrilling" to its power, both stopped in their tracks by a girl and a flower. Gander's reaction is his habitual anger:

> "Well, I pretty near scored off you," he said, annoyed that she made no move to get out of the way.

Hers is "a ripple of laughter. It smote Gander like a blow . . .": like a blow because it is to him unprecedented, as are her "black hair," her "olive-brown skin," her "little black shoes," her "hands so small and fine" — all of which he suddenly begins to notice. Within minutes a

strange event occurs — an animation in Gander we have not seen since his stoking of the steam engine:

> Again she laughed, and Gander felt as though a short circuit were charging him through his steering wheel.

But a surprise to Gander, and a relief to us, not from the machine:

> No, it was coming from beside him; he knew it was coming from the passenger at his side. How dainty she was! How small, and how clean! (p. 147)

The next twenty pages are among the most disconcerting in Canadian fiction. Gander's animation is only a small spark, certainly a spark of hope to the reader, but one nevertheless presently dwarfed by his immense fires of rage and yearning. On leaving Jerry, Gander immediately begins to find his fascination with her intolerable. He feels humiliated, and has a brief rape-fantasy in which he unconsciously punishes her by envisioning her pinned beneath an overturned automobile and at the mercy of his physical strength:

> Absurd although it appeared, he gathered the idea that in some way she was stronger than he. He almost wished that he had had an opportunity to show his physical strength. If the car had turned over, for example. Suppose it had pinned her under! How he would have swung it up, his muscles knotted like iron! He would have raised her in his arms, he would have run with her to the nearest house. (p. 150)

As in the rape-feelings Gander experienced earlier when carrying the unconscious Jo Burge to the pond, the woman is made weak by his strength, the sexual violence disguised as "rescue." Moreover, the fantasy is his creation; it is his imagination which endangers Jerry in order to "save" her. Within the fantasy he is himself the agent of her injury; it is his driving of the car, and *his* car (the car that she earlier stopped by standing in the roadway), that symbolically "pins her under." Out of guilt for his flash of unconscious sadism, a paragraph later Gander abruptly feels "a sudden surging in his heart toward his mother" and offers to help her as she plants young cabbages. Here is the yearning that underlies his rage. The mother is delighted "by this new experience," but also manages during the planting to comment that Gander "will never get in sight of that young minx" Jerry

Chansley. By the end of the next chapter, this suggestion that Gander is incapable of winning Jerry has become Gander's own conviction. He tells Jerry, "You think because you're from the city, an' have been to school more'n I have, an' wear fine clo'es, an' have pretty little clean fingers, I ain't good enough for you." As he does so, he imagines that he sees "the figure of Jo herself . . . confusedly floating in and out between himself and Jerry" and finds himself re-enacting the sexual violence of his earlier fantasy:

> He had thrown an arm about her; he drew her slim body to his. He crushed her weak efforts, holding her fast, until his lips found hers. For a long time he held her. Life seemed to seep from her; her little frame went limp in his arms.
>
> With a sudden fear he let her sink in the grass and, turning, almost ran through the poplar groves to his own home.
>
> (pp. 164-65)

Clearly, given Gander's inner confusion about whom he is confronting — his mother, Jo, or Jerry — and his extraordinary swings between rage and yearning toward any mother-figure, Jerry is fortunate to come through this incident with her life.

The most bewildering aspect of *Grain*'s conclusion is not any change that occurs in Gander, and it is not Stead's belated introduction of new characters such as Cal and Jerry; it is Jerry's continuing patience with Gander. She writes to him from the city, her "you were very rude" (p. 177) being one of the mildest responses to a near-murder we can imagine. Jerry seems simply to refuse to believe Gander incapable of self-control, to refuse to believe herself endangered by him. She attends to some "sterling quality" in him (p. 164) and matter-of-factly assumes its potential strength. Incredible? Perhaps so, but her expectations and her letter are nevertheless structurally essential for the story that Stead now wants to tell. Her letter arouses complex reactions in Gander — an angry rationalization ("he had lost his head over her . . . but he had 'taken it out on her' ") blaming her for his violence; his usual association of Jerry with Jo Burge; and, most important, a stirring "within him again of something he did not understand" (p. 178). This "something he did not understand," ostensibly genuine (as opposed to violent) sexual feelings — elsewhere termed "a new revelation" (p. 163), "a surging for which he had no expression" (p. 156), and a stirring of "unused cells of his being" (p. 142) — is again no less

than the spark of hope on which Gander's future rests. It is also the spark of hope on which Stead gambles the end of his novel, introducing Cal to fan it by example and Jerry to awaken and re-awaken Gander to its presence. The concluding chapter greets us as a tug-of-war between these new responses in Gander, represented by Jerry Chansley and the older, hopeless, and potentially incestuous yearnings represented by Jo Claus (both, as Gander recognizes, bearing the initials "J.C."). Jerry's letter stays in his coat pocket, emerging occasionally to tempt him with the future:

> With something akin to a great tenderness he drew the note from its battered covering, and spelled it out again in the mauve light which flowed up from the lake in reflection to the sky overhead. Yes, Jerry had been a strange but tender incident in his life. She must have cared for him a little, at least, or she would not have written that note. Perhaps, even yet — (p. 201)

Jo, sadly determined to "serve" her permanently invalid husband "to the end" (p. 194) yet seemingly sexually open to Gander, offers Gander another of the ambiguous and partial relationships he has experienced since birth. The latter is a relationship that still feels to us as much incestuous as adulterous — a relationship to the sister of his dead friend Tommy Burge, to the wife of his other friend Dick Claus.

A lot has occurred in the narration between this chapter and the beginning of the book. The supercilious narrator has vanished; the typological descriptions of the Stake family as representatives of prairie life have vanished; the imagery of historical, environmental, and biological determinism has dwindled; and the passages of detailed realism have ceased. The orderly and realistic unfolding of plot has been broken by the gratuitous introduction of new characters. The very title of the book, *Grain,* with its connotations of the implacable man-dwarfing processes of season and harvest, is changed by Stead abruptly in this last chapter into a humanistic symbol, when Minnie describes Gander's pending choice between Jo and a new job in the city as a choice between the chaff and "a little hard yellow golden grain . . . the essence of life, Gander" (p. 204). *Grain* is by now the story of a narrative as much as the story of Gander Stake, a narrative to which we must attend and respond, as Mundwiler argues. It is the story of a novelist who began to care for his main character, to identify with him before even the mid-point of the novel, losing his initial amused detachment from him, losing his will to see him as a mere pawn of deterministic forces. It is the story

of a novelist who cares so deeply for his main character that he breaks with credibility to introduce in the concluding chapters new characters and a pastoral, anti-realistic, subplot in order to give this character some faint hope in the novel's last pages.

"I could have killed you," Gander tells Jerry when she stands in the roadway in front of his car. And he could have, on at least one more occasion as well, and could certainly have "killed" in a number of ways his own chances in life. But our "naturalist" expectations are curbed. Stead will not let Gander be a McTeague, and so he goes through the modes — irony, realism, naturalism, pastoral, romance — to release Gander from this probability and repeats the phrases of hope — the "unused cells," the "stirrings" for which Gander has "no expression." And finally Stead makes the one act which has been impossible for Gander, the accepting of discipline through the granting of trust, paradoxically the way by which his freedom from naturalistic determinism is to be achieved and the "unused cells of his being" set in motion. The trust here on the last page of the book is significantly not the child's trust in the mother but the adult's trust in himself:

> "Gander," he said at length, "now you will take your medicine, and you will take it from yourself."

The new assumption of adulthood is signalled further by the note he now writes to Jo, telling her of his decision to leave immediately for the city:

> He was about to sign it "Gander," but a sudden dignity was upon him. He inscribed his initials, W.H.S. (p. 207)

It has been Stead's gift to Gander of Jerry Chansley that has allowed him this moment. For Jerry has given Gander not only an offer of a job in the city but also a new view of himself as a "serious" person. She has dealt with him as an adult capable of overcoming mechanistic and biological force. When he tells her, "I could have killed you," she replies "Oh, you are much too good a driver to do anything like that." When she advises him to take a job in the city, and go back to school as well, Stead takes pains to underline her "seriousness" and to apologize for Gander's angry reaction: "Gander was too inexperienced to appraise that seriousness at its real value." It is a seriousness we see Gander having internalized on the last page when he signs his adult initials and

accepts his responsibility to life's "muddy road" (p. 207). It is a seriousness also that Gander, despite his inchoate fears and angers, has always wanted for himself, hoping to be called "Bill" by his father (p. 61), eager to assume a "man's life (p. 59) beside his father in the farm work.

And so Stead has moved himself and us from literary determinism to individual responsibility, from naturalism to romance, from entrapment in Freudian drama to a quest for a Maslowvian grail. He has moved us, that is, if we have attended to the narrative, its accumulations of significant image and incident, its breaking of the expected "rules," its evading of the literary categories. Gander will probably not win Jerry — the likelihood of his quickly outgrowing his enormous hostility to women is minimal — but he has chosen to pursue the maturity she embodies. His choice of the city is a rejection of the maternal woman, an affirmation of his own self-worth, and a decision at least to question his feelings of rage. The overall movement of the novel is a pursuasive one because of Stead's palpable fondness for Gander, because of the "unused cells" of response in Gander, and because of our own yearnings for such a state of being as Jerry represents. Jerry herself — despite her necessary one-dimensionality, her daintiness, her small fingers — we experience as no cliché heroine but as a symbolic composite of adult values calling us away from the mother's house, the maternal landscape, the barren excitement of machines, and toward a real sexuality beyond "the muddy road."

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