IDENTITY THROUGH METAPHOR: AN APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF REGIONALISM IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

Arthur Adamson

"O Earth, O Earth, return!"
Blake, *Songs of Experience.*

Look into it more carefully! Why, we don't even know what living means now, what it is, and what it is called! Leave us alone without books and we shall be lost and in confusion at once. We shall not know what to join on to, what to cling to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise. We are oppressed at being men — men with a real individual body and blood, we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace and try to contrive to be some sort of impossible generalized man. We are stillborn, and for generations past have been begotten, not by living fathers, and that suits us better and better. We are developing a taste for it. Soon we shall contrive to be born somehow from an idea.
Dostoyevsky, Notes From Underground.[1]

The growing separation between man in an advanced civilization and the world of nature has been a dominant theme in literature from the Romantics to our time. The term "nature" is of course, problematic: it indicates the primordial energy of life and its instinctual organization. It is the source of corporeal creation, a world without that yet has a mysterious correspondence to a world within. It is represented by chthonian gods like Dionysus as opposed to sky gods like Zeus or Apollo. The philosophic formulation of the problem of this opposition is the central concern of existentialist thought. With the conception of the anti-hero presented in Dostoyevsky's *Notes*

[1]*Three Short Novels by Dostoyevsky*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dell, 1960), p. 140. The Blake citation is from "Introduction," *Songs of Experience.*

From Underground, we note one of the first attempts to treat the theme in its starkest psychological terms and without recourse to romantic or ideological illusions underlying the role of the protagonist. Dostoyevsky presents us with an individual who is startlingly perceptive in his analysis of the life-denying tendencies of rationalist thought and its attempt to fabricate a Utopian society, a "Crystal Palace." Yet this person is himself hopelessly inadequate in his desperate attempts to relate as an individual with his fellow man. Moreover, his very perceptions, by isolating him, aggravate his need for that contact which his mind prevents. He is a precursive representative of existentialist malaise as it emerges in our world. Modern man can recognize the inadequacy of inherited systems of thought and systematic thinking as such, but is confronted with the need to initiate a spontaneous response to life which his intellectual insights have not provided. He finds himself, as Arnold has put it, "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born." The culminating failure of the Underground Man to communicate with a fellow creature occurs with his inability to accept the love of a young prostitute, essentially because, for him, human intercourse can only find expression through abject self-abasement or in the assertion of superiority through the exercise of manipulative power, either of which approaches immediately annihilates the fragile ligatures of genuine affection. Many other works of modern fiction depict the failure of sexual fulfillment in real loving relationships as symptomatic of the sterility and lack of vitality of society as a whole: "The Waste Land," *Women in Love, A Portrait of the Artist, Death in Venice, The Sun Also Rises,* are some obvious examples. This theme of the failure of sexual love, predominant in so many nineteenth and twentieth century works of fiction, takes on, in the context of realism, the archetypal dimensions of the primal fall. Individual experience points to a general condition, a world in which the inanition of our civilization in spiritual terms stems from a gradual denial of nature, of relations in which fellowship and love are undermined and sapped by an inhibiting intellectualism, an unconscious fixation on inflexible patterns of thought and feeling. Of course the theme of unfulfilled love and sexual frustration is not unique to modern literature; it is, after all, archetypal. But modern literature depicts a male-female relationship of mutual destructiveness, not through passion, but its lack; there is a failure to realize *any* intimate communion, as in the examples I have mentioned.

In Canadian literature, too, this theme appears as an important one. It is particularly striking in our literature in that, unlike the European (and even to some extent, American) examples, it appears at a time when the exhaustion of civilization as an independant entity, as a cell of isolated technology, is becoming inescapably apparent in an environment in which nature exhibits a particularly imposing presence. We are confronted with a force which still appears largely in its elemental rudeness. Civilization versus nature is not the one-sided affair it may appear to be elsewhere.

The starting point of my inquiry into the relationship of regionalism and metaphor as existential identity begins with a statement by Northrop Frye:

> . . . Canadian poets have been urged in every generation to search for appropriate themes, in other words to look for content. The themes have been characterized as national, international, traditional, experimental, iconic, iconoclastic: in short, as whatever the propounder of them would like to write if he were a poet, or to read if he were a critic. But the poet's quest is for form, not content. The poet who tries to make content the informing principle of his poetry can write only versified rhetoric, and versified rhetoric has a moral but not an imaginative significance: its place is on the social periphery of poetry, not in its articulate center. . . .
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> By form I do not of course mean external form, such as the use of a standard metre or convention. . . . I mean by form the shaping principle of the individual poem, which is derived from the shaping principles of poetry itself. Of these latter the most important is metaphor, and metaphor, in its radical of form, is a statement of identity: this is that, A is B.[2]

The identity Frye is speaking of has a bearing on the topic of alienation; for alienation and identity are opposites. Most of the wars and certainly all of the bigotries perpetrated throughout history can be attributed in some measure to an obsession with a perverted and false sense of identity. It takes such forms as racism, nationalism, religion — in fact, chauvinism in its many aspects.[3] The need for some sense of identity on a social and individual level cannot be overestimated and it is central to all art. This need is most apparent

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[2]"Prelude to an Uncollected Anthology," in *The Bush Garden, Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), pp. 176-7.

[3]See Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1975), pp. 223-4, 227 ff. See, also, for the female role and its symbolism in society, p. 189.

perhaps for us in the modern novel. Society provides outward signs of collective identity which art reinforces or modifies or challenges. As Frye points out, form is not just outer structure, but the wholeness of a work of art which relates content, the merely superficial setting and incident, to the cultural and biological complex which underlies human relationships and which is clarified by metaphor.

There is an obviously crucial connection between identity and individuality. One of the deeper effects of this metaphoric illumination is the experience of self-discovery. This experience pinpoints our humanity in that it establishes a tension between individuality and the individual's feeling of oneness within a social body. To link these processes of art to regionalism, the popular and perhaps superficial and inadequate term indicating cultural identity, or to refer to an umbilical connection with the earth, is to convey only the crudest idea of the real impact, the far-reachingness, of the actual experience of one's relation to nature, to the physical substrata underlying culture. For perhaps the term "nature" is too abused a word for complete accuracy here. Essentially it is the correct one, but understood primarily as a dynamic polarity which is not necessarily located as an external object of perception. It is also within. It functions in the Blakean sense of "contrary" (a dynamic opposition essential to creative activity), a contrary, then, opposed to mere civilization, or to the mind in isolation, and which is archetypically represented by the "emanation" or "anima," the female aspect of the psyche. The figure of *woman* then is anagogically either earth-mother (nature) or vision (society, art, i.e., culture). This is of course common biblical and mythical usage and I will in the course of the essay simply apply the principle of displacement, in its now familiar archetypal context, to modern literature and civilization. Identity, then, is to be found only through interaction with a contrary; and a contrary here is the outer world that is potentially within us as vision.

Regionalism is, of course, a nexus of place, time and culture. Geographical implications cannot be isolated from historical and cultural realities. Man's habitat is subject to a moment in the flow of time we call history and to the inherited cultural subjectivity of the observer who may be a half-breed or a Ukrainian immigrant. A sense of identity is, largely, what is derived from the confluence of these things that add up to regionalism. It is the feeling of one's place in that confluence. This anagnorisis, as I might call it, is derived from

metaphor — metaphor that is implanted by influences from without, from society, from culture; or metaphor that arises itself in the mind, in the creative imagination, as art.

To quote Frye once more:

> Political and economic units tend to expand as history goes on; cultural units tend to remain decentralized. Culture, like wine, seems to need a specific locality, and no major poet has been inspired by an empire. . . .[4]

Metaphor relates man to the world in which he lives. It is a connective image which at once reveals a disparity and an affinity. The connection moves between the human individual and the perceived order of the world; it is always at once particular and indicative of identity, pointing to cultural orientation. The meaning of society derives from these anagogically formulated insights, and as Spengler and Jung have maintained, even science, technology, and economics, no less than religion, are expressions of symbolical relationships. More recently, the structuralism of Levis-Strauss has demonstrated similar ideas, for example, in the realms of kinship and cooking as related to myth. The origins of these processes that coalesce into a specific culture are obviously obscure, but they are initially to be found in a visionary response to geography and climate, a conjunction of the physical and the mental in the form of symbols which in the course of development are transformed into expressions of spiritual aspiration and finally into science and technology.[6]

If we accept the idea of decline in culture, the American situation is precarious, for we find in it essentially a society attempting something like a heart transplant. As Whitman did, we are trying to assert a distinctive symbolic relationship with the earth, one free of conventional archetypes. Whitman tried to assert a new man. Canadian writers are more cautious. We tend to rely on mere descriptive elements or, perhaps, call on myth derived from Biblical or indigenous Indian sources. Perhaps the best we can do is merely to indicate the nature of the problem rather than to attempt solutions. Nevertheless, the pressing need for identity is apparent in the

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[4]*The Bush Garden,* pp. 175-6.
[5]For Spengler the term "civilization" denoted the final, declining period of a culture.
[6]See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West,* trans. Charles F. A. Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), I, 163 ff.

upsurge of interest now to be found in all parts of the country in our literature as a source of individuality. Our quest has its own uniqueness and is not a mere indulgence but a necessity of survival itself and not in a nationalistic sense, but a human one. To neglect the issue altogether is to be like those representatives of the *status quo* Wallace Stevens describes in "Cuisine Bourgeoise," "Are they men eating reflections of themselves?"

Culture, then, must be in intimate relationship with the land, the land as a correspondence to inner vision, as *numen.* This is the theme of most Canadian Literature today. We have brought to North America, a culture whose metaphors were formed in Europe, and modifications in terms of our relationship with the earth are esential. The tension between man and nature makes the vitality of a culture. However, the more rationalist and materialist we are the less we are in tune with nature as an organism. We worship the images of the past or the delusions of the future. Technology is an expression of our attempt to master nature, to submit it to a mechanistic greed of unthinking consumerism. Science becomes a means of seeing nature not as a human phenomenon at all, not even as a living one, but as either total chaos or total system. Until we realize that our deepest inner selves, which we tend to repress in favour of a rational outlook, are essentially related to the physical world, and not in a mechanistic way expressed through technology and economics, but in a way that is ultimately numinous, we will be like a husband who considers his wife a mere servant to his needs.

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* the term "American" is used to designate contemporary cybernetic man: the mechanized Yahoo who sees nature as alien and non-human, therefore as inferior and expendable, an object merely of consumer gratification and even a target of his destructive frenzy. Now this term used merely literally labels and categorizes a nationality, and in this sense it is a concept: U.S. citizens are without exception, cybernetic necrophiles, or, if you will, technological maniacs. That this charge is preposterous and obviously not the case is an important irony in the novel. At this point the concept becomes metaphor. When Canadians turn out to be "Americans" we have the equation: any civilized man is conditioned by the world he is brought up in to become potentially obsessed with technology to the point of lunacy. That is his identification as an isolated creature in an alien environment is indicated not by national affinity but by a state of mind. Literature

always reveals the metaphor behind the concept: the fixed and defined is a husk from the seed of which emerge expansive forms, a process paralleling the emergence of life out of death. This process is really a renewal, because words are in the beginning always metaphors, and conceptual thought can only straight-jacket them. As a metaphor the term "American" in *Surfacing* designates a tendency in man to carry his civilization to an extreme of mechanized sterility. The image that best conveys this is David's and Joe's camera. It represents a world view which dehumanizes persons and most significantly Anna, as woman, as lover. The concept of "American" has merged into metaphoric representation — the camera's view of the male-female relationship.

In its ironical sense, metaphor reveals identity negatively. The designation of others as "Kikes," "Wops," "Americans" promotes a superior self-image, a mirror reflection of our self-righteousness. Superficailly the self-identification is false. But underlying the misuse of concept is metaphor, which tells the truth in the guise of the lie itself. The person who speaks contemptuously of "fags," "Wops," "Americans" is revealing his own *inner* self, a self of which he is unaware, but which embodies the very identity he seeks to avoid by categorizing the other. This is the well-known phenomenon of projection. My purpose is to show how metaphor is practically ubiquitous and how it points always to a sense of identity.

Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners,* begins with the image of the river that seems, as the wind blows against the direction of the current, to flow in an opposite direction. This metaphor shows the structure of the novel: the flow of time is relentless and irreversible. But the mind, the creative imagination, can reverse the flow and go in the opposite direction. The wind is the ancient archetype found in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," in Coleridge's "Dejection" and indeed in the whirlwind of Job. The capacity of the imagination to reverse time fixes our identity as humans through a natural phenomenon and points out at once our affinity with nature and our capacity to go beyond her. Man has, through art, the distinction of an identity which, far from isolating him, as do categorical affirmations such as the *Cogito ergo sum* (the basic theorem of modern rationality), integrates him with the whole of life. The metaphor of Laurence's title, "divining," expresses, again, the unfathomable workings of the intuitive imagination which is the seemingly gratuitous gift at the core of our experience, a gift which

has its source in the depths of the earth, depths which conceal the mysterious waters of life and which exist below the level of consciousness. That this source of mystical power is water lying deep in the earth, susceptible of irrational divination, precisely indicates the chthonian nature of that missing counterpart which distinguishes true culture from Spenglerian "civilization," the cerebral isolation of modern industrial urbanism.

It seems to me that a central theme in our literature today is one that expresses a *lack* of integration, which reveals an *inability* to achieve whole identity. Our very insistence on the quest for identity is itself an indication of our unease, of our need for assurance. This is perhaps not only a Canadian phenomenon, but characteristic of modern Western man generally. But it so happens that the predicament takes on a stark and dramatic form in a country like Canada today. We are at that precise moment in our development where we are confronted with a crucial decision, or more exactly, a series of initiatives. The sheer physical exploitation of the land is over, to all intents and purposes. Now we are faced with the much more difficult problem of consolidation, the attempt to actually forge a civilization, a world not of exploitation but of creation. This is the point at which a type of Renaissance may occur, and I believe, is occurring. However, to maintain some impetus in a direction that does not lead to destructive conflict and final stagnation, is difficult.

To return to Margaret Laurence. Her protagonist, Morag Gunn, is trying to reconcile an inner autochthonous nature and an outer assumed persona, one which is formed and fostered by the society in which she lives. The dichotomy is between nature and civilization, and true identity can only come with a fusion of the two elements of our human experience. Today man seeks the solution to this dilemma no longer from a ready-made code of values derived from the past, no longer from the structures of religion, philosophy or political or scientific frames of reference or ideologies, simply because this approach has broken down; it is no longer viable. We seek meaning not from without, but from within; the quest is existential, not ideological. The theme of the novel itself, as a genre, comes from the confrontation of the individual with a conformist society that would alienate him from himself. This is the content of the novel; all novels are about this.

In *The Diviners,* society presents a false image of respectability,

first seen in the social elements of Manawaka: the residential area as opposed to the nuisance grounds and the half-breed dwellings. On the one side, the Burghers; on the other, Christie, the garbage man and Skinner, the half-breed. Education is an important function in the acquisition of this respectability through the local school, and, later in the novel, through the University in Winnipeg as represented by the character Brooke Shelton. Brooke is the representative of civilization in its negative aspect. It is not respectability only which is his mask, but an even deeper and more subtle sophistication: that of culture in its commitment to a surface intellectual refinement. Brooke requires a sexual relationship in keeping with his cultural self-image, one that offsets the artificiality of his refined urbanity by reflecting a facade of innocence. Morag is to play this role in his life. Brooke's world-picture derives from an imported culture which will not recognize the human reality of autochthonous life, of nature, of earth, of the vulgarity of humble origins. He cannot therefore envisage Morag as a person; she must conform to his image of her, one concocted of the pseudo-innocence that responds to a neurotic need, one wherein sexuality is a denial of life itself. He tends therefore to shut himself up in a fantasy world and to see society only in those terms, only in relation to himself. In this way, however, he excludes his own essential humanity. The half-breed, Skinner, represents the quasi-chthonic sub-culture of our split society. He is the rejected reality of Canadian life, half Indian, half white, alien to nature in a certain sense, but, more significantly, alien to the self-contained artificality of a civilization which fears its own irrational origins in the earth and which must be repressed. Brooke's immediate negative reaction to Skinner's presence in the apartment and to the latter's drinking his Scotch whiskey is a fine metaphoric encounter, an instance of the civilized white man's categorization of the native people as irresponsible barbarians. As we saw earlier, a categorical label of disparagement directed outwards is an indication of a hidden reality within. This is the core of Brooke's fear of life.

I am not trying to show that the novel is allegory in the form of realism, but that realism itself cannot escape metaphoric implications simply because cultural reality is itself a complex of metaphors. Human society is distinguished by the fact that archetypes are an extension of, or have, in certain instances, replaced instincts.[7]

[7]Carl G. Jung, "The Structure of the Psyche" and "General Description of the Types" in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 44-5 and p. 233.

When Brooke rejects Skinner, Morag realizes that he is rejecting her. Skinner is all that she herself had earlier sought to deny in her own past. She knows that she cannot have a real human identity in her relations with Brooke. She leaves with Skinner and bears his child. But Skinner himself is, in a different way from Brooke, unable to share her life in a fulfilling way. In connecting Morag with the death of his sister and her children, he is unable to dissociate her from an image of the white man. But he fathers her child, which means that he is a source of life at least. In his own way he is an artist too. But Morag can only complete her own identity through her art. In life she remains split, and in this she reflects the Canadian rift, the dichotomy within our cultural identity. The chthonian gods are suppressed by the sky-god: the Titans are imprisoned in the earth by Zeus.

On the one hand, civilization is a closed system in its denial of the native people and the land: it is a facade of false identity. On the other hand, we have alienated the land by our reckless exploitation of it, and the natives by our ruthlessly mercenary values and they in turn reject us. (Although this sounds like a statement of moral outrage it is in fact, perhaps, nothing more than a description of an inevitable historical phase.) We are in the position of Pentheus in Euripedes' *The Bacchae:* we deny the chthonian reality that manifests itself out of the very sky god we worship; that is, we deny an essential part of our own natures, and this dichotomy leads to our inevitable sparagmos.

In Atwood's *Surfacing,* also, the conflict involves a civilization which can only see nature as chaotic energy to be negated and neutralized, the ultimate metaphor of which is the crucified heron. The father represents rational civilized man, but he comes, in the end, to an understanding of chthonic power, not as disruptive and destructive, but as a source of spiritual creativity. The heroine also learns this through him.

The content of Canadian myth or the metaphoric paradigm of our present-day literature is the confrontation of the individual with a society which attempts to force itself as a stereotyped structure on nature. As this society grows more rigid, it closes off all possibilities of organic regeneration and so becomes sterile and dead. In the novels under consideration, the metaphors that show this are particular manifestations of local forms: the crucified great blue heron, victim of motor-boating tourist fishermen; the garbage dump of Manawaka as

a depository of the suppressed, hidden truth about the automatons of respectability, of which the dead baby wrapped in newspaper is the most striking example; the death by fire of the half-breed family in their tar-paper shack; the abortion in *Surfacing* as a hullucinatory frog pickled in a jar, an object of scientific experiment. It is not description of prairie scenery or of the Precambrian Shield that makes a regional writer, but the ability to translate descriptive elements into metaphor, to reveal the reality of the confrontation of nature and civilization.

The male-female relationship is the prime metaphoric alignment in literature which indicates the stereotyping as opposed to the particularization of human and environmental relationships. When the central figure in a novel is female, there will probably be two men (or two types of men) in her life: the one associated with conformism or intellectuality; the other with individualism or natural energy. In *Surfacing,* as in *The Diviners,* the protagonist has turned from a man associated with a life-denying adherence to civilization to the primordial Joe, the buffalo man. The hero's first lover has brought her to the traumatic nightmare experience of abortion, the lowest point of her descent into "victimization." The images of frog-in-jar, foetus and drowned brother/father are fragmented flash-back glimpses of her internal dead self confined within a sinister technology. The underwater world is both elemental chaos, the unconscious *and* the excluded body, split-off counterpart of the mind-in-isolation, which characterizes megalopolitan civilization. Her immersion is thus not into the chaos which is nature as envisaged by extreme rationality, but into the spirit-domain of that world as integrated with vision. (To the rational mind, nature is pure externality of total ambivalence: system or chaos. The imaginative vision embraces nature as an organic potential of identity, the complimentary female individual.) Joe, with whom she mates, is the earthy counterpart of her first lover, the sophisticated contriver of abortions (although, like Skinner, Joe is also an artist of sorts). The primacy of body is asserted for the moment over mind. The goal is a re-establishing of equilibrium, a return to civilization with the inner power of earth obtained through the sustaining vision bestowed by the pictographs.

Metaphor reflects the tension between civilization and nature. The decline of culture occurs when civilization becomes exclusive, self-contained and loses contact with the irrational world-as-numen. In space, this happens through geographical dislocation (the American experience); in time through the ossification of the historic

process. The translation of culture from Europe to North America has accentuated two opposite and conflicting tendencies of Western society — one that is apparent and conscious, and one that derives from a repressed motivation. On the one hand, the opening up of a new world with all the possibilities this offers of renewal and opportunity releases the exuberance of idealism, the "American Dream." On the other hand, as if some obscure anxiety and self-doubt lurking in the depths of our nature had to assert itself as a counterweight to the liberating tendency, no doubt invoked by the confrontation with nature as an untamed wilderness, the new society has from the very outset manifested a spirit of rigid conformism. Liberality is offset by an obscure but tenacious inner guilt. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* finely delineates these obsessions and conflicts. In Canadian literature, too, this pattern is noticeable. The most usual form it takes is an opposition between religion as an imperative of restraint and the inferred bestiality of bodily impulses, particularly sexual passion. In general, the clinging to ethnic identity, so peculiar to Canadian life, reinforces this.

There can be no more binding ideology than one combining religion and race. By race I mean any community in which identity is based on family ties and tribal conformism. The dogma reinforces congregational self-enhancement through identity, in the form of a collective narcissism. The deeper ideals of religion become curiously distorted to serve not human love but self-righteousness. In Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many,* the focal point of conflict is not merely the question of blind adherence to a pacifist creed, which itself is seen as questionable in the light of sheer fanatical insistence, but the elitism underlying any Procrustean dogma. The Deacon's extremism destroys first his daughter and then his relations with his son, as well as seriously undermining the community's relations with their neighbour half-breeds. The latent violence within the Deacon takes on the dimensions of a truly frightening irony. The denial of an inherent inner energy as potentially sinful is finally self-destructive. It merely accumulates behind a damn of fear instead of manifesting itself as creative energy expressive of a love shaped by an imaginative visionary correspondence between the individual and his world. All rigid moral assertion betrays a repression and hence a dark and secret will alien to its possessor. Doctrinal religion is one of the forms of civilization which merely negates, in the name of fear, not only instincts, but the capacity for a love which is not determined by

prejudice. Contrary to the assumption of systematic thought, the particular takes precedence over the general in genuine human relationships as in genuine art. Wiebe perhaps more than any other living Canadian writer has consciously pursued the theme of the need for autochthonous identity not as a mere concept but as a living reality.[8] Clearly, such a reality begins with human relationships which recognize and act upon the individual and the community of individuals respected as unique and particular, and acknowledges the correspondence between the inviolable core of truth within every living being and of every organic entity in nature.

In Wiebe's book we feel little sympathy for the rigidly authoritarian Deacon. In Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice,* the central figure, Abraham, the father, is himself a victim, first of persecution in Russia where he loses two sons in a pogrom and second in his adopted country, Canada, to which he brings his wife, now broken in spirit, and his remaining son, Isaac, and where he struggles for survival in a world in which his cherished traditional values are more and more out of place and even despised. Here he loses his last son who enters a burning synagogue to retrieve an irreplaceable Torah. Ultimately this son's already weakened heart gives out and he dies, leaving Abraham, by now a widower, with his son's wife and his grandson Moses. Striken with grief at his son's death, the old man ends up in an insane asylum, having murdered, in a fit of derangement, a woman of loose reputation, Laiah, who had taken a fancy to him and attempted to seduce him. There are thus in fact two sacrifices: the son, who, with the obvious parallel in the Old Testament, is in a sense sacrificed to the old traditional ideas, through giving up his life under the influence of his father's fixation on the past, and the prostitute-type, who has taken on in Abraham's eyes

[8]In his paper "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," *JCF,* 3, No. 3 (1974), pp. 43-5, Robert Kroetsch deals with Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* as well as with Atwood's *Surfacing* and Robertson Davies' *The Manticore* taking an approach which anticipates mine. As a matter of fact, Kroetsch's fiction would lend itself to examination along these lines. *Badlands* is an interesting example of a return to sources as an ironical pseudo-quest. Seeking out the bones of the dead (our ancestral dinosaurs) is, at one level, a scientific investigation in archaeology involving, significantly, a human sacrifice (unintentional), and is in no sense a true return and rebirth. However, as in *Surfacing,* the father indicates a way to freedom and self-awareness away from this dead past to a daughter. This crude summary does not do justice to the highly developed ironical subtleties of the work, but it does indicate some of the possible variations on the theme. There is a similar treatment of the theme by Margaret Atwood in her remarks on the novels of Frederick Philip Grove in *Survival* (Toronto, Anansi, 1972), pp. 122-3.

the attributes of all the depravity and disorder he feels himself so long oppressed by. In fact, she represents a part of himself that he has never come to terms with other than by taking refuge in his carapace of religious orthodoxy. In both instances the individual has been lost to the idealized fixation of past/future. In the case of the son, the frightening irony is that Abraham has, through a literalist interpretation of his Judaic heritage, committed the very error which the biblical Abraham (metaphorically) avoided. (The irony is underlined by Wiseman: the Biblical episode is pointedly related in the novel). We perceive how a man noble and loving within certain limits (the limits prove to be fatal) errs catastrophically and apparently innocently through an inflexible commitment to a religion unquestioningly tied to race, tradition, family. This commitment has been intensified by persecution. The loose woman, Laiah, is a further sacrifice, which makes this unmistakably clear. As victim, she is a scapegoat for Abraham's own suffering: she becomes in his eyes the personification of "sin," all that he has all his life eschewed. Like Job, he has observed the letter of the law, not, unfortunately, the spirit. Isaac, who sees this, dies for his father's limited faith. Laiah is the object of the latter's baffled self-righteous anger, an innocent offering to his inhuman god, in whose eyes she is not a person but the materialistic vulgarity and mendacity that he has so long detested. After the terrible deed, Abraham himself becomes aware of the truth, seeing in the murdered woman his own murdered sons and recognizing in her the principle of life itself. No character in modern fiction comes closer to the dimensions of Lear than this agonized figure.

Brooke Shelton in *The Diviners* closes himself up within a world that excludes the bestial, the sordid, the vulgar, as he envisages them. Abraham similarly sees his orthodox Jewishness as a bastion against an alien and depraved world. Unfortunately, as with Brooke, his inflexibility is protective in an unrealistic way and leads to the loss of his remaining son and to his own undoing. His inability to transform his suffering into a creative form of love alienates the very object, his son, in whom he has fixed an image of the fulfillment of God's will. Finally he is reconciled to his grandson through a recognition of his mistake.

Abraham is akin to the father in *Surfacing* although the tragic dimension is greater. The latter, too, is dedicated to a comprehensive system: the one follows eighteenth century rationality as the other a

literal theology. Both fathers are more admirable than the people who have no ideals and who represent the exploitive, grasping aspect of civilization: in *Surfacing* the "Americans", in *The Sacrifice,* the *grobions,* Laiah, Polsky and particularly the latter's son, Hymie. The one father is drowned, weighted down by his camera (technology), and the other commits murder in the name of righteousness (religion). Both have attempted to move from one world to another (one from rationalism to animism, or perhaps merely anthropology, the other from the Old Country to the new) and although both fail themselves, a significant insight is gained which is communicated to their progeny. The sense of tragedy predominates over irony since their deaths, or failures, are significant in bearing fruit for the future.

I have tried to show how metaphor is related to identity and hence to regionalism, since there is a correspondence of relations between individuals with those between the community and the land. This correspondence takes the form of male-female relationships, or of dogma as antithetical to the human imagination. Another theme, usually related to these (as we have seen in previous examples) is that of the artist as representative of the true individual — that is, the inwardly free man. In Ross's *As For Me and My House* we find an individual who, with increasing deliberate hypocrisy, maintains a status within society (reminiscent in an ironical and inverse way of Arthur Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter,* for here too there is a secretive liaison) as a minister of religion. At heart this man is an artist. In his art he expresses, albeit fitfully, all the compassion and affinity which inwardly relate him to his surroundings and fellow man. The thwarted artist (we recall that the heroine of *Surfacing* is a commercial, i.e. tainted, artist, a situation corresponding to her "victimization" by civilization) is a figure who aptly represents the potentiality of vision and individuality in the face of anti-imaginative conformism. The wife, too, has given up her artistic career as a concert pianist to maintain their relationship, thus heightening the bleak irony of Ross's outlook.

In this novel, we find the strands of male-female relationship, of religious dogma as the antithesis of art and freedom and of artist versus society, subtley entwined. There is a finely maintained ironic equilibrium here that imbues this work with a sombre tonality, an interplay of human actions that uncovers a deeply ingrained frustration. Nature, itself, the matrix of an alternative vision to the conformist and largely materialistic community of Horizon, the prairie

setting of this harsh portrayal of human and natural dessication, is antagonistic and unproductive. The husband and wife seem locked together in perpetual misunderstanding. Life comes, eventually, only from a momentary outbreak of confused passion between husband and a rural ingénue. A cherished adopted son is, in fact, rather a clod, and in any case is taken from his foster parents on religious grounds (the boy is catholic), leaving them to adopt finally the offspring of the husband's illicit passion, whose mother has died in childbirth. Here is a gesture of hope for continued life. The metaphoric implication is that out of this impasse a fitful aberrancy of nature may send off a spark into the engulfing darkness. The novel presents all the themes I have discussed in a prairie context and fixes us in a bleakness of non-fulfillment which marks a nadir in the life of this country. Ross has depicted the precise moment at which all the accumulated ignorance and paralysis of will which have benighted our beginnings have attained their point of no return. Here we must either perish of or go on to better things. Probably for Canadian Literature, and certainly for Western Canadian Literature, *As For Me and My House* has the precise cultural equivalence that *The Scarlet Letter* has for American Literature. I am not asserting an exact parallel, for there are differences which reveal the significant divergences in the two cultures. Once again we note that it is the metaphoric constellation which structures a work of fiction and fixes its regional meaning. Description is merely the dressing.

Identity comes through metaphor and so culture is essentially regionalist in its creative forms. Metaphor is derived from immediate experience, and is linked, as we have seen, to regionalism. Regionalism becomes liberated, so to speak, by this process, and so is not the same as provincialism, rather its opposite. Provincialism comes from a state of mind which reflects a lack of confidence in local individuality and pallidly imitates the supposed glamour of international centers. Art unites the minute particular of metaphor with the organic totality of cosmic life. Just as metaphor is unintelligible without its reference to the particular human form which it links with nature, so culture as a whole is unintelligible without its derivation from the primal experience of locality, the geographic and historic nexus. Canadian culture is a search for identity like all culture. What is derived from Europe or elsewhere must be fused with the individual corporeal experience. The tendency of our civilization which the term "American" designates in *Surfacing,* our

technological and institutional obsessions, widen, not close, the gap. An emphasis in our institutions of learning, for example, on scientific and international modes of thought fosters a dangerous neglect of the real tensions that are in a living, thriving culture. If we lose sight of our roots by promoting solely a schema of intellectualism divorced from the body of immediate experience (Blake called this schema the "Web of Religion"), we are essentially consolidating a past in isolation from the living present.

University of Manitoba