EDWARD McCOURT: A REASSESSMENT

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Edward McCourt is one of the most prolific and yet unrecognized of Canadian writers. Brought up on an Alberta homestead and a professor of English Literature at the University of Saskatchewan from 1944 until his death in 1972, he recorded over a period of thirty years his particular vision of the prairies, the region of Canada which had irrevocably shaped his own life. In that time he published five novels and forty-three short stories set (with some exceptions among the earliest stories) in Western Canada, three juvenile works based on the Riel Rebellion, a travel book on Saskatchewan, several radio plays adapted from his western stories, *The Canadian West in Fiction* (the first critical study of the literature of the prairies), and a biography of the 19th century English soldier and adventurer, Sir William F. Butler, whose *The Great Lone Land* was one of the most memorable early accounts of the Canadian West. In addition to these Western works, McCourt published two travel books: *The Road Across Canada* and *The Yukon and Northwest Territories* as well as a wide variety of critical articles and reviews.

Such a resumé of his accomplishment is necessary because few people are aware of the extent of McCourt's published work or will have read anything he has written. He has passed from relative obscurity during his lifetime to almost total oblivion after his death. Some writers, such as Sinclair Ross, are fortunate enough to live to see an early novel like *As For Me and My House* which was ignored on publication justly acclaimed thirty years later. McCourt did not have that satisfaction. *Music At the Close,* his excellent first novel of the depression years, published shortly after Ross's and at the same time as W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind,* received the Ryerson prize for fiction in 1947 but had sold only 2500 copies two years later.[1] Although like *As For Me and My House* it was reprinted

[1]Letter from McCouirt to John Gray, 4 February 1950, in Macmillan (Toronto) *Home is the Stranger file.*

by New Canadian Library in 1966, renewed accessibility did not produce critical acceptance. McCourt remarked, with what must have been some bitterness, just before his death that "*As For Me and My House* and Anne Marriot's oft-anthologized poem, *The Wind Our Enemy*, seem to be all that we have found worth saving from the very considerable body of prose and verse which the Depression called into being. . . ."[2]

McCourt's statement about his first novel is applicable to all his work. His last four novels — *Home is the Stranger* (1950), *The Wooden Sword* (1956), *Walk Through The Valley* (1958) and *Fasting Friar* (1963), sold only a few hundred copies on publication and then disappeared from view; only *The Wooden Sword* (1975) has been reprinted since his death. One can easily obtain a copy of the collected stories of Sinclair Ross but only three of McCourt's stories are readily accessible in short story anthologies of the seventies.[3] In general anthologies of Canadian or of Western Canadian literature, Ross and W. O. Mitchell have been and remain the only Western novelists of the forties and fifties whose work is consistently reprinted although their reputation rests entirely on one novel and a small body of shorter fiction. McCourt, by contrast, is usually omitted entirely from such collections or represented by selections from his travel books of the sixties rather than by his fiction.[4]

The editors of such anthologies have taken their cue from the critics. Desmond Pacey set the pattern for McCourt criticism in his *Creative Writing in Canada*, first published in 1952 and revised in 1961. He mentions McCourt along with Sinclair Ross, Christine Van der Mark and W. O. Mitchell as a prairie realist of the forties, but finds his *Music At The Close* considerably less effective than either *Who Has Seen The Wind* or *As For Me and My House*. Reviewing

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[2]"Prairie Literature and its Critics," in *A Region of the Mind: Interpreting the Western Canadian Plains*, ed. Richard Allan (Regina: Canadian Plains Studies Centre, Univ. of Saskatchewan, 1973), p. 156.

[3]"Cranes Fly South," in *Stories of Western Canada*, ed. Rudy Wiebe (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 141-145; "Dance for the Devil," in *Tigers of the Snow*, eds. James A. MacNeill and Glen A. Sorestad (Don Mills, Ont.: Nelson, 1973), pp. 121-133; "The White Mustang," in *Wild Rose Country: Stories from Alberta*, ed. David Carpenter (Toronto: Oberon, 1977), pp. 31-44.

[4]For example, he is represented in *A Century of Canadian Literature*, eds. H. Gordon Green and Guy Sylvestre (Toronto: Ryerson, 1967), by a selection from *The Road Across Canada* and in *The Prairie Experience*, ed. Terry Angus (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975) by an excerpt from *Saskatchewan*.

the four novels McCourt had published up to 1961, Pacey praises McCourt for his "social documentation, some fine description of the prairie landscape, thoughtful discussion of moral issues and a style which is always competent and at moments reaches genuine distinction,"[5] but finds him weak in characterization and given to adding melodramatic episodes to otherwise realistic plots.

However, by comparison with the first edition of Carl Klinck's *Literary History of Canada,* published in 1965, Pacey is generous in that he at least pays McCourt the courtesy of attention. In that later volume one learns that McCourt had contributed to Macmillan's "Great Stories of Canada" series[6] but not that his contribution had been two juvenile works: the factual *Buckskin Brigadier* (1955) and fictional *Revolt in the West* (1958). One finds an appreciative quotation of McCourt's judgment of Laura Goodman Salverson's novel *The Viking Heart* without being told that the quotation is taken from McCourt's pioneer study *The Canadian West in Fiction* (p. 666). Miss Salverson, although a much less talented and prolific writer, is accorded more attention than McCourt himself who is simply mentioned after a detailed examination of Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* and Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* as one of "two other writers [of the fifties] who have taken up the search for individual or communal identity" (p. 712). The given list of his published novels is not even complete, omitting both *The Wooden Sword* and *Fasting Friar.* As in Pacey's study no mention is made of the forty-one short stories McCourt had published by this date. The revised version of Klinck's *Literary History* which appeared in 1976 alters the original estimate only in that the reference to "Great Stories of Canada" has disappeared and been replaced by a sentence in praise of McCourt's 1967 biography, *Remember Butler.*[7] In the same history Sinclair Ross is given more than two pages, W. O. Mitchell, half a page.

This kind of critical imbalance is evident even in studies limited to Western Canadian fiction. Donald Stephens includes two articles on Ross and one on Mitchell in his *Writers of the Prairies* (1973) but

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[5]*Creative Writing in Canada,* rev. ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1961), p. 253.
[6]Carl F. Klinck, ed. *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 630. All future references to this work will be given in the text.
[7]Carl F. Klinck, ed. *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English,* 2nd ed., III, 198.

omits any paper on McCourt, perhaps because only one critical article has been written to date, George Baldwin's excellent "Pattern in the Novels of Edward McCourt" published in 1961,[8] whereas the work of Ross and Mitchell and to an even greater extent of the vastly overrated F. P. Grove has evoked numerous articles, theses and books. Although McCourt's fiction is dominated by the prairie landscape, Laurence Ricou's study of that landscape, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973) relegates him to a peripheral position. Ricou gives entire chapters to Robert Stead on "The Benign Prairie," Grove on "The Implacable Prairie," Ostenso on "The Obsessive Prairie," Ross on "The Prairie Internalized" and W. O. Mitchell on "The Eternal Prairie," but considers McCourt only briefly, among recent writers who present the prairie as existential, as "a metaphor for the meaningless," a landscape "empty and nightmarish, peopled by bewildered frightened men" — solitary "vertical" men set in "the uninterrupted, empty horizontal."[9]

It is encouraging that the most recent study of prairie fiction, Dick Harrison's *Unnamed Country* (1977) recognizes McCourt's achievement by treating his novels as the equals of those produced by Grove and Ross. However, Harrison essentially follows earlier commentators in seeing all three as exemplars of "an accomplished realistic fiction of rural prairie life"[10] which developed from the 1920's to the late fifties. In describing "nature as inimical to man" (p. 126) all these realists exemplify for Harrison that broadly Canadian malaise defined by Northrop Frye as the "Garrison Mentality"; it leads them, "feeling their culture threatened by the vast indifference of the wilderness," to "huddle together, stiffening their meagre cultural defences and projecting all their hostilities on their surroundings" (p. 130). They present "the imagination stifled by an overwhelming environment," but it is Harrison's contention that "the plight of the imagination is to be blamed not so much on the environment as on a long cultural tradition of inadequate response to it" (pp. 152-53). They accept as their standard an old culture, of "the sheltered towns and farms of Britain and Ontario," which is "ill adapted to the life and landscape of the prairies" and has "tended to

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[8]*Queen's Quarterly*, 68 (Winter 1962), 574-587.
[9]*Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape In Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 112.
[10]*Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 100. All future references to this work will be given in the text.

distort, to obscure, and to isolate them from the plains" (p. x). McCourt is seen as the most extreme example of this approach, the "only writer to make the landscape itself so threatening . . . he is always more conscious of its terrors than of its beauties;" while he "can never be completely identified with his characters who see the prairie as totally inimical to the imagination," he "never seems to recognize the transplanted culture he so admires as having any part in that failure" (p. 147).

To sum up, McCourt has usually been treated (in studies of both Canadian and Western fiction) as an inconsequential prairie realist who stresses the grimmest characteristics of prairie life. In as far as is possible within the confines of a brief essay I would like to challenge these judgments of his historical and literary significance. Without making any claim that McCourt is a writer of the very first rank, I would insist that he has been as underrated as F. P. Grove has been overrated; that this critical dismissal has occurred largely because he has been incorrectly classified as a realist; that in the context of Canadian literature he has made a noteworthy contribution to what has been the principal theme of the principal writers of his generation — the puritanical and philistine nature of Canadian life; that his chief importance as a regional writer lies in the connection he makes between that puritanism and prairie landscape; that he has written two novels — *Music At The Close* and *Walk Through the Valley* — which deserve the same respect as Ross's *As For Me And My House* or Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind,* and as many excellent short stories as these writers.

If one looks at the writers of the forties and fifties who are McCourt's contemporaries — Hugh MacLennan, Robertson Davies, Irving Layton, Sinclair Ross, W. O. Mitchell — one finds that they have one characteristic in common: they all describe Canadian society as dominated and warped by rigid, repressive, restrictive socio-religious codes which insist upon denial of the senses and the emotions. For these writers, the full development of man's sensual and emotional potential is essential to the health of the individual and of the society in which he lives. The general situation in this country as they see it is expressed in its simplest form in Robertson Davies' 1948 play *Overlaid* in which the domineering, self-righteous Ethel bullies her father into spending his windfall insurance money on an expensive tombstone rather than a sensually satisfying trip to New York to savour a gourmet dinner, hear a live performance at the Met

and enjoy a nightclub strip-tease. All of Hugh MacLennan's novels of this period, as Patricia Morley has pointed out, have as one of their basic structural principles "the confrontation between these death-seeking attitudes labelled 'puritan' and the belief that life is something vital and joyous to be accepted with gratitude and enjoyed to the full."[11] Ross and Mitchell give us portraits of small Saskatchewan towns dedicated, as Mrs. Bentley puts it, "to the exacting small-town gods Propriety and Parity"[12] in which steely-faced matrons like Mrs. Finley or Mrs. Abercrombie force, or try to force, the letter of their moral law upon such free spirits as the Young Ben or a would-be artist like Philip Bentley.

It is most interesting that these writers attribute both the life-denying and life-enhancing values and attitudes to specific ethnic groups. MacLennan finds the roots of death most frequently in that "ancient curse," Scots Calvinism, in Dr. Ainslie in *Each Man's Son,* for example, but insists, too, through such characters as Father Beaubien in *Two Solitudes,* that French-Catholic Jansenism has shaped Quebec in the same puritan mold. Robertson Davies admits the negative influence of Scots Presbyterians, as his recent portrait of Mrs. Ramsay in *Fifth Business* illustrates, but he is sure the Anglican English are as bad if not worse. For Davies our only hope lies in the Welsh and Irish, both full of the unrepressed Life Force. In his 1950 play *At My Heart's Core,* the devilishly fascinating Irish gentleman Edmund Cantwell, in league with the wild Irish bog poet Phelim Brady, fires the carefully repressed passions of the English Strickland sisters and their Scots friend Mrs. Frances Stewart. In *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958) Davies delights in creating a plot which permits the Irish-Canadian singer Monica Gall to use the fortune of Mrs. Solomon Bridgetower, that coldly domineering pillar of Salterton's English establishment, for purposes that lady would have heartily disapproved: learning the meaning of passion in art and life and financing an opera written by a Welshman. W. O. Mitchell describes a town governed by the intolerant congregation of Knox Presbyterian Church and associates Brian's Scots mother, grandmother and teacher Miss MacDonald with repressive respectability while his wild and profane Irish Uncle Sean O'Connal teaches his nephew about

[11]Patricia A. Morley, *The Immoral Moralists* (Toronto: and Vancouver: Clarke Irwin, 1972), p. 5.
[12]Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), p. 6.

leprechauns and the joy of living. Only in Ross's Horizon are all Wasps lumped together without distinction in a community which places Rumanian or Hungarian Catholics like Steve and his father beyond the social and moral pale. On the other hand, Irving Layton views all Canadian gentiles, whether French, Irish, Scots or English as constipated Christians. Only the Jews, more particularly Jewish poets, specifically himself, understand passion and can thus provide Canadian society with the emetic it so desperately needs. "On Seeing the Statuettes of Ezekiel and Jeremiah in the Church of Notre Dame" (in his 1959 volume *A Red Carpet For the Sun),* he promises to save his bored compatriots from this stultifying French-Catholic "make-believe world/of sin and penitence":

> I shall not leave you here incensed, uneasy
> among alien catholic saints
> but shall bring you from time to time
> my hot Hebrew heart
> as passionate as your own, and stand
> with you here awhile in aching confraternity.[13]

The third point worth noting about these writers of mid-century is the significance they assign to landscape. For the three Eastern Canadian writers — MacLennan, Davies and Layton — physical terrain and climate are irrelevant to their themes; they are quite unaffected by the "Garrison Mentality"; for the Westerners Ross and Mitchell prairie landscape and climate are a crucial part of the general system of values they describe. Ross's narrator Mrs. Bentley sees the howling dust-filled wind, freezing cold and vast emptiness of the prairie during the depression as one with the spiritual and aesthetic aridity, frigidity and vacuity of the town itself, a combination of deadly forces which have stifled her husband's career as an artist. However, Mrs. Bentley projects all her emotions — not simply hostility — on her surroundings. Her concept of this landscape is entirely subjective, reflecting the state of her marriage. When she and Philip are at odds (as they usually are), the negative qualities of the prairie proliferate, but any fleeting moment of marital happiness can produce a shift in perspective which discovers beauty in this setting where none existed before.[14] Her own imagination and aesthetic sense are certainly unstifled. In Mitchell's novel the depression prairie

[13]*A Red Carpet For the Sun* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1959), No. 129.
[14]See, for example, pp. 23, 28.

is equally important but set in *opposition* to the town in an almost Wordsworthian fashion. The small boy through whose eyes we most frequently see finds far more of freedom, beauty and truth on the prairie than he does in the town. The socially unacceptable prairie-dwellers — the Young Ben, the mad Saint Sammy and profane Uncle Sean teach him more about God than he learns in Knox Presbyterian Church. The natural cycle of the seasons brings him understanding and acceptance of the terrifying mysteries of human life and death.

Edward McCourt is absorbed by the same general problem which obsesses his contemporaries, works it out to a certain extent along ethnic lines and, like the two other Western novelists, makes landscape integral to his theme, but he sees it from a very different perspective. Desmond Pacey fairly described McCourt as a "realist" in the sense that his novels provided "a more accurate reflection of the actual conditions of life" on the prairie than could be found in most earlier regional idylls (p. 253) but he seems to have concluded that accurate depiction of the prairie's harshness was McCourt's sole aim and to have found him deficient inasmuch as he deviated from strictly realistic plots or characterization. In fact, McCourt, like his contemporaries, presents a dichotomized world. On the one side is what he would call "reality" — the domain of the rational, the routine, the prosaic, the practical, the factual; on the other is what he would call "romance" — the world of dreams, poetry, imagination, lawless freedom, heroism, intense emotion, sensitivity. The very terms he uses for these two poles emphasize the first way in which he differs from the previously examined writers. What they would condemn out of hand as puritan and philistine he calls "realistic"; what they would approve as the only true reality he terms "romantic." His aim in every novel is not to condemn the one or the other but rather to reveal the positive and the negative characteristics of both extremes in order ultimately to effect some compromise between them. His first four novels are written from the viewpoint of intensely romantic protagonists many of whose dreams and ideals, largely drawn from literature, are proved false or illusory in the course of the action until, at the novels' close, they are brought to accept, in varying degrees, not the complete negation of their romantic world but its necessary modification by reality. McCourt is not, as Harrison asserts, an unqualified admirer of their "transplanted culture"; in fact, he proves it is largely responsible for their failure to

cope with their environment. His fifth novel, *Fasting Friar,* reverses this pattern; there a hard-nosed realist is gradually brought to a recognition of the place romance should have in his life if it is to be fully satisfying. The reversal also prevails in three unpublished novels written after *Fasting Frair* — "Ragged Regiment," "The Coyote Hunt" and "No Snow on the Mountain" — which cannot be discussed in this paper.[15]

In *The Canadian West in Fiction* McCourt had insisted that the western novelist must reveal the impact of the prairie on his characters.[16] Certainly he follows his own critical dictum. In all his novels the prevailing dichotomy is expressed through two opposed landscapes: hills, dunes and mountains stand in opposition to the prairie. In the first four novels the plains are to the protagonists the tangible topographic expression of a grim reality and hills the place of romance but in *Fasting Friar* their symbolic significance is exactly reversed. All of McCourt's critics have seen his presentation of the prairie as intensely negative but in fact it is his central characters who see it in this manner and all of them, with the exception of Neil Fraser in *Music at the Close,* are brought to view it differently before the novels' closes. McCourt himself is as well aware of its positive as of its negative characteristics.

Harrison's argument that most prairie fiction presents "the imagination stifled by an overwhelming environment," is not applicable to Ross, Mitchell or McCourt. McCourt suggests that this particular environment *stimulates* rather than stifles the imagination of the sensitive person; finding little to satisfy the senses in the flat, stark plains each of them turns for gratification to the most romantic literature or most exotic private fantasies. He is very sympathetic to their sensitivity and appreciation of literature and beauty; he would agree in essence with the conclusion of Neil Fraser's freshman English essay: " 'Dreams, translated into action, have been responsible for all of the advances made by mankind. . . . When a man ceases to dream he ceases to live' "[17] *but* he makes each of them suffer from an *overactive* imagination which makes it impossible for them either to cope effectively with the prosaic details of everyday life or to perform the kind of heroic exploits that are the stuff of their

[15]"Ragged Regiment," G. 10, 11 and 12; "The Coyote Hunt," G. 2; "No Snow on the Mountain," G. 9, McCourt Collection, University of Saskatchewan Archives.
[16]*The Canadian West in Fiction* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1949), p. 55.
[17]*Music at the Close* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 129. All future references to this work will be given in the text.

dreams. Conversely, and ironically, he shows that the prosaic prairie people are better equipped than the romantics to face crises heroically, largely because they lead orderly lives and lack highly developed imaginations. Their perseverance and stoic endurance are a match for whatever malevolence nature can manufacture, from drought to howling blizzard.

McCourt reveals the weakness of the romantic position by so plotting his novels that these characters witness or participate in exactly the kind of dramatic situations they have created in their dreams or read about in romantic literature, situations which involve danger, mystery and intrigue, which call for heroic exploits. Pacey's charge that McCourt always loses faith "in the power of the ordinary processes of life to hold our interest and resorts to melodrama" misses entirely the author's intention and the central irony in his fiction. The romantics have complained of the dreary monotony of prairie life and landscape; he gives them what they said they longed for — the extraordinary, the unexpected, the incomprehensible — and shows them terrified, miserable, impotent — anything but heroic — in such circumstances. McCourt creates these episodes of high drama to prove that when they occur in actual fact to real people they have painful, destructive or simply sordid consequences as they never do in romantic fiction or private dreams.

Music at the Close tells the story of a romantic dreamer from the time of his arrival in 1918 on a prairie farm at age twelve, until his death in World War II. In boyhood Neil Armstrong develops a standard of what life should be like which is based on romantic literature. He sees an affair between the dashing remittance man Charlie Steele and the beautiful Helen Martell as the mating of Lancelot with Gwenevere until Charlie actually murders his mistress' husband. He is appalled by the thought of Charlie hanging from a real rope but expects his hero to effect a daring escape to the lawless land on the other side of the river. Instead Charlie commits suicide rather than face the protracted pain of two very prosaic assailants: hunger and hordes of mosquitoes, and Neil himself weeps at his failure to help either the man or the woman he had idolized. Once all that he had considered "romantic and mysterious" (p. 75) in the dull prairie community of Pine Creek has disappeared, Neil finds it even more necessary to satisfy his longing for these qualities by existing in a private dream world where he plays a variety of heroic roles. When he combines dreams with hard work and perseverance he succeeds

in completing his high school certificate by correspondence and pitching his baseball team to a glorious victory over a superior club, but too often he makes dreams a substitute for action or gives up if a little effort does not produce instant results.

His is the kind of temperament least able to cope with the kind of harsh reality found on the prairie after the stockmarket crash and during the long years of drought. He cannot tolerate at the best of times the flatness of rural prairie life and landscape. What he appreciates is the majesty and mystery of the Rocky mountains: "When he . . . looked across the valley of the Bow at the mighty upheaval of granite . . . Neil experienced the kind of emotion that had come to him only twice before — when he had heard Minnie Whittaker read 'Ulysses' aloud, and he himself had first stumbled upon the jewelled passages of Conrad. It was an emotion that had in it pleasure and awe intermingled, and above all a strange indefinable pain, a longing for something that had no concrete substance" (p. 136).

He admires but cannot emulate the other farmers who are "baffled, beaten but not passive, unwilling to accept what had happened to them as either the will of God or the consequence of their own follies," although he knows that "in that refusal . . . lay the secret of their capacity to endure and to fight" (p. 181). Neil himself becomes one of those men who have ceased to live because they have ceased to dream. Marriage to the woman he had once loved but lost because of his idealism brings only temporary respite and takes him back to the farm he hates. The characterization of Moira as a woman who combines a love of poetry and lacy lingerie with hard-headed practicality serves to emphasize Neil's ineffectuality; their marriage disintegrates because she will not permit him to substitute impossible dreams for constructive action in reality. When he has sunk into an abyss of hopelessness and debt, the eruption of World War II offers what he sees as a God-given opportunity to avoid all his problems. However, Neil does, before his death on the beaches of Normandy, realistically admit his own responsibility for his failure in life. One is not sure at the end of this fine novel whether Neil's death is a final victory or the ultimate escape.

By the time the Irish war-bride Norah Armstrong comes to live on the prairie in *Home is the Stranger,* times are easier. Roads and telephones have decreased the isolation of rural people and in a good year such as the Armstrongs experience, a careful farmer can

make a clear profit of eighteen thousand dollars on his crop. However, the prairie is just as depressing an environment to Norah as it was to Neil. Here McCourt parallels Davies and Mitchell in associating Ireland and the Irish with romantic values. The novel begins amid the green hills of Erin and throughout the novel Norah, like her fellow exile Brian Malory, makes disparaging contrasts between them and the prairie. They are a place of tradition, mystery and enchantment, a fit home for gods, leprachauns and banshees while this raw new land, stretching undisturbed to a remote horizon, affords no concealment for gods, ghosts or human beings. Like Brian she longs for a place where " 'there are no straight lines anywhere, but everything up and down and nothing flat except maybe a bog and it's as likely as not to be on the back of a mountain.' "[18] Loving music, poetry, excitement, she finds little kinship with her prairie neighbours who are dull uncultured automatons.

While Norah and Brian are entirely of the hills and their neighbours are entirely of the plains, Norah's Scots husband Jim comprehends both. Like Moira in *Music At the Close,* he functions as the norm by which the other characters are judged and found wanting. The vast spaces which terrify Norah give him a glorious sense of freedom from restriction; while she is bored by the monotony of empty plain and sky he finds in them infinite variety. He tells her, " 'The sea is like the prairie. Never the same for a minute. That's because the light shifts. And you can see a long way. I like eye-space' " (p. 3). At the same time he also recognizes the limitations of prairie society, particularly its lack of tradition and its crass materialism. There is much evidence to prove that he is himself a man of imagination and taste. When he works dawn to dusk, consumed with fear of hail, drought and frost, Norah fears he has become one of these characterless prairie people without the capacity to dream, but once the rich crop is safely harvested, he proves his practicality is judiciously blended with romantic recklessness. He celebrates by making love to his wife in the moonlight; he uses part of the money for the kind of prosaic comforts Brian Malory deplores — electric lights and indoor plumbing — but part for good music, elegant clothes and impractically lacy lingerie for Norah. Most significant in terms of the novel's symbolism, he plans to take her on a holiday to the Rocky Mountains, because he too knows the lure of

[18]*Home is the Stranger* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1950), p. 62. All future references to this work will be given in the text.

the hills. As a boy he has loved the beautiful flamboyant daughter of the wild Kendall tribe who ranched a ridge of hills in the district before it became less colourful farmland.

By contrast Norah is an extremist whose uncontrolled imagination almost ruins her life. Imagining her neighbour Gail Anderson to be in love with Jim she begins a flirtation with the attractive Brian Malory who "in a dull world of conformity . . . was a vital incongruity" (p. 126). Imagining an inoffensive mental patient threatens her child, she throws herself upon him and then faints in his arms. When she regains consciousness "it was not the mistake itself — though it in truth was bad enough — but her inability to meet the situation as her imagination conceived it which stirred in her the bitter sense of shame" (p. 90). Norah longs to be a heroine but the very imagination which conceives of heroic exploits incapacitates her in a crisis. Jim's sudden departure in mid-winter to attend his father's funeral gives her a last "chance to prove to him her ability to meet a crisis, to meet it without fear or vacillation" (p. 163) but she fails again. When the worst blizzard in living memory leaves her isolated with a sick son, she is sufficiently panic-stricken to welcome Brian Malory as a lover. Dreaming of her lover, she forgets her son who wanders out into the snowdrifts, catches pneumonia, and dies. Her sense of guilt leads to attempted suicide and a long period of mental illness. The real hero of the storm is the hired man Weary Rivers, comically ugly and inarticulate — the antithesis of the knight in shining armour — but nonetheless courageous as he rides his horse time and again through near impossible drifts to help Norah and his other neighbours.

As she slowly returns to health, Jim reveals the depth of his love for her by planning to move to a fruit farm in British Columbia, to a place with "hills all round, mountains in the distance" but Norah knows that Jim "who breathed easily only under an immense vault of sky" would be "hemmed in by the crowding hills." She knows she must not go "and what filled her with a strange and awful sense of joy was the realization that her decision was not an act of renunciation. She did not want to go. She was ready to make terms with the earth itself" (p. 268). Norah's acceptance of the prairie is an acceptance of reality which McCourt presents as a measure of her growth to maturity.

In *Walk Through The Valley,* written by 1954 although it was

not published until 1959,[19] McCourt describes a few tumultuous months in the life of Michael Troy, a boy of fourteen in the mid-twenties, living on the family farm in the Cypress Hills region of Saskatchewan just after prohibition has been voted out and a profitable trade running whiskey across the border to the still-dry United States has developed. Unlike W. O. Mitchell, McCourt sees the central problem of growing up as being at that point in one's life where reality begins to impinge on the world of romance, where it is perhaps most difficult for the inexperienced to judge what is romance and what is reality. Geography defines the problem precisely. Michael lives *exactly* at the point where hill and plain meet: "Away to the west, where the plains sloped up to merge with the swell of hills, at a point where you couldn't really say the hills began or the plain ended, he could see . . . the roofs of the farm buildings which were home."[20] Michael's father had chosen the location for its nearness to the hills which satisfy his romantic nature. A shiftless but charming Irish raconteur, rather like Davies' Phelim Brady, Dermot Troy enthralls his son with the story of the great stag on the high plateau who is really the Irish god Finn McCuil in animal form. Michael believes the tale fully and when he is able to save the stag by spoiling a hunter's aim, he rejoices in this triumph of romance over reality.

However, Michael has reached the age when he can no longer sustain such fantasies with ease: "Up until a year or two ago . . . whatever he wished was true for the time of thinking. . . . But now, except when he escaped to the high plateau where the new free world seemed to stimulate and strengthen the power of his imaginings, he could think of things wished-for with diminished intensity and only for a little while" (p. 28). Because existence within a purely imaginative framework has become increasingly difficult to sustain, Michael is all the more willing to believe that the hills actually harbour romance in the person of the glamorous whiskey runner Blaze Corrigal with whom his father has formed a secret partnership. His dreams have been "invested with a reality derived from the presence of flesh and blood. Blaze Corrigal was a figure of dreams —

[19]McCourt asks for the return of the manuscript in a letter to John Gray, 19 October 1954, in Macmillan (Toronto) *Buckskin Brigadier* file.

[20]*Walk Through the Valley* (London: Arthur Barker, 1958), p. 15. All future references to this work will be given in the text.

he was Robin Hood and Wild Bill Hickock and William Tell and Jesse James. And he was real, real!" (p. 81).

However, McCourt's geographic symbolism has warned the reader that there is in every sense a great gulf between romance and reality which Michael must eventually acknowledge. Immediately after he has defined the farm's location as the extra point where hill and plain *merge*, McCourt describes the valley as "a deep narrow crease between high plateau and plains." It is "a queer and sinister place," directly linked with the valley of the shadow of death in the 23rd Psalm, where trees "stood gaunt and lonely and dead, in a wilderness of dead underbrush and rotting stumps, and the water . . . was dead too" (p. 17). Michael must walk through this valley, discover that men are mortal and that his heroes have feet of clay. When the police reveal that Blaze has shot a man in cold blood, Michael "saw Blaze Corrigal with pitiless clarity, not as a reckless, swashbuckling cavalier, heir to a great romantic tradition, but a cold and deliberate killer . . . who had shot down a defenceless man without pity" (p. 194). He also sees the father he has idolized for his daring defiance of the law shrink to a small-time racketeer, suddenly old and broken by the threat of a long prison sentence. Dermot redeems himself in Michael's eyes by leading the police on a wild goose chase while Blaze escapes but he dies at its end, accidentally not gloriously, from a bullet fired by a nervous policeman.

Simultaneously Michael acknowledges the quiet, unassuming heroism which can exist in the prairie world he had previosly regarded as a place of unrelieved drabness. Michael's mother is presented as entirely of that world, an absolutely honest, reliable, law-abiding, strictly religious teetotaller, without any of his father's flair. Like his sister, Michael has resnted these qualities which account for her intense disapproval of the others' involvement with Blaze and his whiskey, but in the crisis of their lives she is the rock whose strength holds them all together.

At the beginning of the final chapter it appears that Michael has been forced to accept the complete triumph of reality when he acquiesces without protest in the family's symbolic move from the farm near the hills to the town on "the dull endless plains that hold no surprises, no suggestion of mystery" (p. 216), but the book does not end at this point. Michael slips away again to his place of refuge on the plateau. Trying to come to terms with his father's death, he again stares down into the valley, comprehending now its full

symbolic significance. Just as he is overcome with fear that life will hold nothing but pain and sorrow, he is granted a second glimpse of the great stag. This vision "of something great and strange and enduring" transforms Michael's mood. He knows that "the power was in him henceforth to defy the worst that life could do to him" (p. 221). The painful reality of human frailty and mortality has to be accepted but men are sustained in bearing that pain by things of the spirit.

The last two novels McCourt published express the same need to find a balance between romance and reality but this time in the context of the academic world. Both Steven Venner in *The Wooden Sword* and Walter Ackroyd in *Fasting Friar* are professors of English at Western Canadian universities whose personal problems are examined in relation to the changing concept of the University which began to make itself felt in the late fifties, in a general movement away from taditional humanist education to training in the more obviously practical professions and, within the humanities themselves, in an increased emphasis on scholarship and publication. When the novels begin the two protagonists are polar opposites, studies respectively of extreme romanticism and extreme realism.

Steven Venner's romantic idealism has reduced him to mental illness. He is beset by a recurring nightmare which makes him sexually impotent, isolated, detached and cynical, a failure as both husband and teacher. Gradually he learns that his condition has been produced by the same shortcomings he exhibits throughout the novel: romantic role-playing, uncritical acceptance of an ideal code of behaviour and rigid or simplistic application of that ideal to real life. From early childhood he has been influenced by his parents, his reading and his own sensitive temperament to worship an ideal place, the mysterious, secret desert, whose shifting dunes have been the home of men who personify his ideal of manhood, who live out great extremes — "conquest and abnegation, lust and ascetism, hatred and love"[21] and face danger or death with unwavering courage. His own life has been lived on the drab prairie which like Neil, Nora and Mitchell, he hates because "it held no secrets. Whatever had happened on its featureless face lay open to the eyes of all men" (pp. 16-17). He has never found or fulfilled his own masculine ideal and every failure leads him farther from reality

[21]*The Wooden Sword* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1975), p. 17. All future references to this work will be given in the text.

because his reaction is always to blame the failure either on external circumstances or his own weakness, to retreat as far as possible from any situation which might expose his deficiencies and to compensate by dreaming more intensely than ever. When he is given ideal external circumstances, required to play the role of soldier-lover with the Eighth Army in their desert campaign, and fails then to measure up to his own impossible standard of courage, his conscious mind blots out all memory of the experience until the possibility of returning to the desert produces the nightmare. Only when he moves from egocentric isolation to genuine concern for his wife can he muster the courage to admit his cowardice and thus regain his sanity and his humanity.

Despite the fact that this is primarily the story of a romantic idealist almost destroyed by his flight from reality, the novel is a complex statement of the pros and cons of both the realist and romantic positions. Steven is balanced by Dr. Claude Fotheringham, a historian who has built an international reputation as a scholar by being "detached, impersonal, concerned only with the hard cold facts that can be endorsed in footnotes" but at the end of his life what matters to him is a few poems "which reflected all that he has really lived by" (p. 93). Professors of the humanities who insist the intangible aspects of human experience — sensitivity, imagination, poetry — are of more "real" significance than any number of concrete facts and figures resent the way they have been displaced in the modern university by disciplines such as chemistry or accountancy; the faculty as a whole resents the "tradition which decrees that since the teacher derives such abundant spiritual wealth from his work he must be above and beyond a vulgar interest" in higher salaries (p. 133). All save Brian Archibald "moved restlessly between two worlds," the spiritual and the material, "never completely at home in either" (p. 138). This little Irish "leprauchaun" (p. 148) with whom Steven is juxtaposed is capable of switching with protean dexterity from dusty scholar to vehement union organizer and back to scholar again. Like Jim Armstrong in *Home is the Stranger* he is the norm by which the others are judged and found wanting. He encompasses both worlds.

In Walter Ackroyd of *Fasting Friar* McCourt develops the theme played out in a minor key by Dr. Fotheringham. Also a fastidious scholar, Ackryod has hidden himself behind walls of neatness, order and concrete facts, deliberately shutting out all emotional involve-

ment with other human beings. He hates the prairie where he was born and where he has taught all his life not, like the romantics, because it is predictable and lacking in mystery, but because it is *not* neatly patterned and finite. He is terrified of leaving the walls of the university which "held all of life that had meaning and design. Beyond lay disorder, triviality, and a loneliness that was without logical order. . . . He thought with regret of the great universities in the east. . . . They did not stand in fortress-like isolation, beleaguered by sinister powers of which the prairie was the visible expression. . . . Huddled safe in the shelter of crowding hill and forest they gave a man at all times that sense of security denied him here the moment he set foot outside the gates." For Ackroyd "the sky overhead was not a dome. . . . A dome was concrete, its limits defined. But the sky was simply a void, an emptiness flecked in daytime by immaterial wisps of cloud, in the night by dots of light that intensified by their inadequacy the terror of complete vacuity."[22]

As the novel progresses Ackroyd is forced by circumstance to become involved with other people, particularly with a woman who teaches him the meaning of love and makes him aware that the vacuity he saw in the landscape in fact lies within himself. Marion Ettinger is an Easterner who has nevertheless learned to love the plains: " 'It's so lovely," Marion said. 'It gets you doesn't it? The prairie I mean?' " (p. 33). For her as for Jim Armstrong infinite space is equated with emotional and imaginative fredom. Her capacity for imagination and emotion enables her to find beauty on the prairie in delicate wildflowers hidden in ravines which Ackroyd, despite his continuing fear of that "immense bowl of empty sky" (p. 133) is reluctantly forced to recognize. By the end of the novel, when he has committed himself to passion and love, his attitude to the prairie has changed radically: "He stood close beside her and looked into the darkness. Here and there lights showed across the plains. The pictures they conjured up of gaunt farm houses exposed on all sides to the terrors of the great void would once have sent a chill through his bones. But now he looked at the plain and the night and the remote, indifferent stars and felt at peace" (p. 221).

Although the thematic and geographic range of McCourt's short stories is broader than that of the novels, most of the stories fall into two groups which invite comparison with the longer fiction. The

[22]*Faster Friar* was published in England as *The Ettinger Affair* (London: Macdonald, 1963), p. 11. All future references to this work will be given in the text.

novels reveal the dangers of extremes of romanticism or realism which the protagonists must recognize and rectify before they can become "whole." In the first four novels, each of the central characters longs to be "heroic" and defines the "hero" as a handsome, strong, charming lover who is, above all, dramatically courageous in a crisis. Neil imagines himself saving Helen from a stampeding herd of cattle at the cost of his own life; Nora, her son from drowning. Michael would be a combination of Robin Hood, Wild Bill Hicock and Jesse James; Steven, a glorious soldier-lover in a desert war. All of them are desolate when either they or those they have conceived in this heroic mold (Charlie Steele, Blaze Corrigan) fail to fill it. The point McCourt makes over and over gain is not that these dreamers are completely wrong. He too believes courage is the essence of heroism. A man may be as handsome as Byron, strong as Hercules and charming as Casanova but he is not a hero if he lacks courage. However, he teaches that in the real world courage often manifests itself in very different ways than those imagined by his protagonists. Esentially he agrees with Moira in *Music at the Close:* " 'Neil, why don't you try living in the real world for awhile? It's more honest — and more heroic' " (p. 168).

This questioning of the romantic concept of the hero is also central to a large number of McCourt's short stories. It takes different forms but the most common situation is that an unpretentious man who lacks most of the popularly accepted attributes of the hero in some way proves his courage and so wins the love of a beautiful, previously unattainable girl. In "Birth of a Hero"[23] the central character had always been poor, unattractive, unathletic and unnoticed by the girl he loves or the people in the small town where they live. The popular hero is rich, handsome, and a star athlete, but when they both go off to the Korean War, it is the "hero" who loses his nerve (and his life), the protagonist who saves their patrol. However, his most impressive act of heroism, which wins him the girl, is performed on his return from hospital, when he makes the dead man's father happy by concealing the truth and preserving the image of his son untarnished. In "The Short Cut"[24] the Norwegian boy who is narrator reveals how he and his sister Helga had adored their friend Tor Elvsted, a strong, daring athlete whom they fearfully

[23]*Family Herald and Weekly Star,* 84 (9 July 1953), 16-17.
[24]*The Standard Magazine* (Montreal), 39 (22 May 1943), 4-5 (West ed.); (15 May 1943), 4-5 (East ed.).

follow on hair-raising ski-runs. However, when the crisis comes in the form of World War II, it is Tor who becomes a follower of the Nazis and the narrator who joins the Resistance. Helga breaks her engagement to a man she considers a cowardly traitor and Tor lives in his own private hell until he is able to regain his heroic stature by finding the moral courage to use his physical nerve to save his friends from the enemy.

The ideal Western hero — quick on the draw and tall in the saddle — undergoes a comic metamorphosis in several stories. In "A Present For Santa"[25] a quiet schoolteacher from the East gains the interest of the much admired daughter of the biggest rancher in the foothills because he is a gentleman who can play the organ and appreciate poetry, but she cannot accept him as a potential husband because his inability to stay seated on a horse for longer than sixty seconds makes him the laughingstock of the country. She asks him to play Santa Claus for the Christmas party at which she is expected to announce her choice among the more suitable candidates for her hand. One of his rivals offers him the meanest bronco in the West as the mount for his ride to this party. He proves he has a hero's courage when he persists in trying to ride a horse not even the best cowboy can tame and (after being thrown five times), walks seven miles through a blizzard to preside as Santa without uttering even a groan at his cracked ribs and multiple bruises. When Sally learns of this feat, she makes the appropriate choice. In "Night Patrol" a romantic young Easterner whose "eyes had the look of wonder in them you see in children who live mostly in dreams" goes West to be "a cattle baron like he'd read about in books."[26] He settles with a few mangy, overpriced cattle on a leased ranch and good naturedly accepts the community's laughter at his constant blunders. Even when the RCMP constable takes away his gun to prevent him from maiming himself or the neighbours, he is hurt but uncomplaining. One night the local cowboys convince this gullible young man that rustlers are abroad, but the pretty daughter of the man who owns the only store warns him the rustlers will really be his pals, bent upon making him the butt of another joke. Forewarned he goes out to intercept them, but when one of the two men he accosts shoots him, he finally loses his temper. One he hits over the head with his rifle, the other he fells with one mighty blow to the jaw; then, despite his

[25]*Family Herald and Weekly Star,* 78 (24 December 1947), 12-13.
[26]*Family Herald and Weekly Star,* 85 (11 March 1954), 24.

wound, he brings them both in to the constable at the store before pitching forward unconscious. When he regains his senses the adoring young lady lauds him as the hero who has singlehandedly brought to justice two dangerous bank robbers (the local boys had put off their fun because of inclement weather). The unwitting hero apologizes for losing his temper.

Whether serious or comic, these stories which redefine the romantic hero[27] stand in opposition to another group which reveal McCourt's deep understanding of and sympathy for another aspect of the romantic experience. The best stories he has written express the average man's longing to escape from his dreary round, the ecstasy he feels when for a moment he glimpses heaven or attains to godhood and, often, the subsequent pain he experiences when the visionary gleam fades again into the light of common day. "High Sierras," published in the fall of 1948 just when McCourt began to write *Home is the Stranger,* describes the same clash between romance and reality using the same geographic symbolism found in the novel, but here McCourt's sympathies are entirely on the side of the romantic dreamer trapped in a community of insensitive pragmatists on a literally and metaphorically flat plain. In this dramatic monologue the restaurant owner in the small prairie town of Barnesville unwittingly reveals himself as a Canadian Babbitt while telling an out-of-town customer the story of "crazy" old Joe Belcher. As secretary to the Chamber of Commerce he, like the other "good substantial businessmen" he admires, believes " 'we got just about everything right here in Barnesville that a person could want' "[28] and considers Joe "crazy" not because he does little work and drinks excessively, but because he longs to leave. " 'Me, I'm goin' where there's hills,' [Joe'd] say over and over again. 'Mountains, that what I want, mountains that r'ar right up and stick their tops through the stars. These plains is too doggone flat' " (p. 23). Too complacent and unimaginative to comprehend his longing to rise above a dreary

[27]See also "Space Crazy," *The Standard Magazine* (Montreal), 39 (6 March 1943), 20; "The Ancient Strain," *Queen's Quarterly,* 52 (Winter 1945), 329-444; "Brothers-in-Arms," *Family Herald and Weekly Star,* 77 (17 April 1946), 28-29 and 24-25, in two undifferentiated eds.; "Wilderness Ordeal," *The Standard Magazine* (Montreal), 49 (9 July 1949), 5, 16; "Who Walked with Kings," *Family Herald and Weekly Star,* 81 (29 June 1950), 18; "Romance for Vivienne," *Weekend Magazine (Montreal Standard),* 2 (24 May 1952), 20-21, 27; "A Rope to Hang a Man," *Star Weekly* (31 October 1953), 1, 12.

[28]*Macleans,* 61 (1 September 1948), 22.

reality, they deliberately get him drunk the night he had planned to leave for Mexico, " 'to set on the top [of a mountain] in a snowdrift and watch the stars come out and mebbe grab a handful' " (p. 23). They are cruel enough to laugh when he permanently injures his leg trying to board a boxcar in his drunken stupor and to ostracize him when he reacts violently to their idea of a good joke. When he later becomes a hero during a fire, they are prepared to give him a testimonial dinner and take up a collection but they refuse to believe that he really wants, as he says, a one-way ticket to the High Sierras. When he is presented with an all-expenses paid ten-day trip to a lodge near some sandhills fifty miles away and told the substitution is even better than his dream, the bitterly disappointed man tears the ticket in two, returns to his shack and dies.

Equally dissimilar to the novel of the same name in its total effect is the short story "Walk Through the Valley" (1953).[29] Both young Michael Troys experience the same intimations of immortality when they see the stag and save it from the hunter's gun but the story excludes all the references to the valley of the shadow of death found in the novel and permits Michael the unqualified romantic triumph of being himself elevated to the heights in the act of preserving this god of the high plateau.

Young Jedd O'Donnell in "The White Mustang" is less fortunate than Michael although their stories are remarkably similar in other respects. When he sees not a stag but a white horse on the hilltop above the family's foothills farm, he wants to catch it, believing it is a neighbour's stray and that the five dollar reward will buy him the rifle he craves. His father Dermot, like Dermot Tray of the earlier story, assures him this is no ordinary beast but the famous White Mustang — impervious to bullets, uncatchable — but capable, should one be lucky enough to lasso him, of carrying his rider " 'to a country you've never seen where the grass is as green as the spring feathers of a mallard' " and " 'you'll find a beautiful princess with long golden hair waiting for you'."[30] When Jedd finally undertakes his quest after agonizing delays, he finds the Judson's horse, dead, and returns disconsolate to the farm. Believing his son grieves for the loss of the

[29]*Weekend Magazine (Montreal Standard)*, 3 (3 January 1953), 22 (West ed.), 3 (East ed.).

[30]First broadcast on the CBC, "Winnipeg Drama," 7 February 1957. First published in *Canadian Short Stories*, ed. Robert Weaver (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960). Reprinted in *Wild Rose Country: Stories from Alberta*, ed. David Carpenter (Toronto: Oberon, 1977), p. 33.

rifle, Dermot promises to buy it, but Jedd continues to cry, weeping not for the lost reward but for the loss of his dream; a decaying mortal horse has replaced the immortal milk white steed from fairyland.

McCourt understands that such moments of epiphany can come to the very old as well as the young. In "The Trumpet Shall Sound" an eighty year old prairie farmer whose eyes "looked pretty washed out and dim most of the time" can make them "burn with a blue flame"[31] whenever he recalls the glorious day on which he blew the charge, recall and Last Post as bugler to the victorious 90th Rifles in the Battle of Fish Creek during the Riel Rebellion. He gives his carefully preserved bugle to a sensitive young boy who listens patiently and with understanding to his often-repeated story. When the old man dies the boy pays him the tribute he would most appreciate and in the process experiences his own epiphany playing the Last Post at his burial. "The trumpet shall sound and death where is thy sting."

In "Cranes Fly South" another eighty year old prairie farmer tells his grandson of the mingled "ecstacy and pain" he felt forty years before watching the great flocks of whooping cranes pass like thunder in their southern migration and knowing he could not satisfy his longing to join them in this journey to an exotic utopian world. He still longs "to go south. . . . to set in the sun all winter and see things besides flatness. Man gets mighty tired of flatness. . . ."[32] That dream had seemed less and less capable of fulfillment as he grew older and the magnificent birds grew rarer and rarer. When his grandson tells him a single crane has landed on a nearby slough, he is torn between disbelief and a longing to se the bird, between fear that the excitement will kill him and fear that he may die without making another tangible contact with the dream that keeps a man truly alive. When they find the whooper, "they stood together, man and boy, held by an enchantment that was no part of the drab, flat world about them," watching the bird climb "fast and far into the remote pale sky" where "he seemed to hang immobile, suspended in space beyond the limits of the world" (pp. 143-44). His grandson feels no guilt when the excitement does bring about his death a few hours later. " 'He's gone south,' " he said.

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[31] *Family Herald and Weekly Star,* 88 (6 November 1958). 16.
[32] *Weekend Magazine (Montreal Standard),* 5 (16 April 1955), 42.

The last published and perhaps most painful of the stories written on this theme is "The Medicine Woman." A slow-thinking, rawboned and awkward girl, orphaned at the age of twelve, is taken in by an elderly couple. Mel never goes anywhere or seems to mind her isolated life, doing her work well and in silence. The only sign that she yearns for anything beyond this dull routine is her painful plodding through old school readers late at night. When she is eighteen she meets Benny MacNamara, a drummer who canvases the prairies in a brightly painted van, selling spices, extracts and perfumes. Mel is impressed enough by his good manners, clean white shirt and fragrant shaving lotion to change into her best dress when he visits the farm. She listens while he tells the family how much he loves his carefree gypsy life and protests that he couldn't marry: " 'It's no life for a woman. See? A woman . . . wants a roof over her head that stays in the same place. She wants security'."[33] However Mel is enchanted by his van with all its bottles and tins sparkling in "an eye-dazzling blaze of light and colour."

When Benny returns some months later and finds her alone she puts on her Sunday best, using the scented soap and talcum he has given her. When he invites her to see the van she is so mesmerized by the experience of "being inside a rainbow" she scarcely notices Benny's arm around her, but when she surrenders to him, she does so "with a kind of joy" and afterward, lying on the coyote skin rug, "her eyes held the strange drowned look of a woman who had loved to satiety" (p. 81(.

When Benny promises marriage, the reader expects the usual ending to such stories of travelling salesmen but Mel's betrayal is of an entirely different kind. True to his word and his conception of what a woman wants, on their wedding Benny sells the van in order to buy a buggy and homestead. He never understands that Mel is broken-hearted at the loss of her chance to escape from security to the carefree gypsy life. When he enlists shortly afterward and dies in the mud of Flanders, she doesn't shed a tear. She remains alone on the farm, growing more gaunt and peculiar with every passing year as the frame shack and yard grow more unkempt. She spends money only to buy back the van and purchase quantities of patent medicines. One day she is found dead, stretched out naked on the coyote skin rug, in the restocked, immaculate van.

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[33]*Queen's Quarterly,* 73 (Spring 1966), 77.

The theme which dominates all of McCourt's fiction — the struggle to find a compromise between romance and reality — also dominated his personal life. His unpublished autobiography "The Long Years" goes far to explain his fictional preoccupations. This manuscript, covering the period from his arrival with his family from Ireland on an Alberta home in 1910 until his completion of high school by correspondence in his late teens, documents a childhood very like that of Neil Armstrong and Michael Troy. It makes clear that McCourt understood the romantic dreamer so well because he had been one himself. A sensitive, imaginative child, he found little satisfaction of his craving for adventure, excitement and emotional release in a generally happy but humdrum existence on a marginal pioneer farm with strict fundamentalist parents. He reveals that, as a result, "The *authentic* [italics mine] world of my boyhood was in a large measure created by the books I read. Robin Hood, D'Artagnan and the Three Musketeers, Wild Bill Hickock, Girt John Ridd, Buck Duane and a score of kindred spirits were my daily companions."[34] The "new and naked" land in which we lived stimulated both because it did not satisfy and did not hinder his imagination; traditionless and relatively featureless, it was "a world in which the imagination was free to roam unfettered by the tyranny of fact" (p. 58) and upon this *tabula rasa* young McCourt drew the most memorable landscapes from the pages of romantic literature, chalking in the fields of Agincourt one day, Sherwood Forest the next.

It is not surprising that McCourt should be able to describe so well the temperament which sees the world polarized between two mutually exclusive extremes. There was virtually no connection between his imaginative life and daily reality. On the rare occasion when this peaceful and prosaic farming community did throw up a character who appeared to resemble his romantic heroes or heroines, disillusionment inevitably followed. In "The Maltese Piano,"[35] published as a short story but in fact a chapter from the autobiography, he describes how a pretty young girl visiting the more aristocratic family in the district shatters a tender mood by playing "K-K-Katie" badly on the elegant piano imported from Malta rather than the romantic music he considers appropriate to the occasion

[34]G. 8, McCourt Collection, University of Saskatchewan Archives. All future references to this work will be given in the text.
[35]*Montrealer*, 37 (June 1963), 29-31; Chapter 15 of "The Long Years."

and the instrument. In "A Man from the Drink,"[36] also part of "The Long Years" but published as fiction, he counterpoints his boyhood attraction to a charming and handsome but alcoholic remittance man, very like Charlie Steele, with his teetotalling parents' strong disapproval of their neighbour's intemperance. In that contrast lies another reason for his disillusionment; by no means could he consider many of the actions which were perfectly acceptable in fiction compatible with the moral code he was taught to follow in real life.

More important, he could not personally emulate except in imagination the charm of his heroes because he was as a child and adolescent so painfully shy he found ordinary conversation with anyone outside the family circle almost impossible. He was taught an extreme form of self-control by a "rigidly fundamentalist" father, so emotionally restrained that McCourt could write of him: "to say my father was an undemonstrative man is a masterpiece of understatement" (p. 8); he "lived in fear of God, his children in fear of him" (p. 9). It follows naturally too that a boy raised by a father who believed fervently that "heaven and hell were as real and decisively separated as day and night; mankind . . . divided into the saved and lost" should create characters inhabiting a universe in which romance and reality become the secular equivalents of heaven and hell.

McCourt himself, however, sought to bridge the gap between these two extremes. Unlike Hugh MacLennan, he did not cast off entirely his rigid Calvinist background but rather adopted a more moderate version of it. He gradually overcame the paralysing shyness of adolescence but remained to the end of his life a reserved, self-contained man who was embarrassed and angered by the kind of exhibitionism Irving Layton used to convey his artistic credo. He replaced his father's hellfire religion with agnosticism but retained his secular values because he learned early that they could be used to make his personal dreams a reality. Avoiding the temptation to escape into a world of fantasy, following the Puritan code of hard work, perseverance and self-discipline, he completed high school by correspondence, developed his natural athletic ability and graduated from the University of Alberta a Rhodes scholar. The same qualities made him a successful university professor of English and a prolific writer; by no other means could he have produced in twenty-five

years 17 full-length books, over 60 short stories (several unpublished), eight radio plays and a wide variety of miscellaneous journalism while fully employed as a teacher. Happily married, temperate in his pleasures, his life was a steady round of teaching and writing, writing and teaching, with only an occasional holiday excursion to break the routine. As a boy he found an outlet for the suppressed part of his nature in reading romantic literature; as a man, in the act of creation itself but particularly in articulating the romantic agony and ecstasy. In that articulation there is also a measure of self-justification; by stressing the dangers of romanticism in those first four novels he proves he had himself chosen wisely in avoiding it. The shift to concentration on the limitations of extreme pragmatism in his novels of the sixties suggests that McCourt, like many another man in his fifties watching the inevitable decay of the body, had become keenly aware of the need to find emotional and sensual gratification while it was possible and could still be enjoyed. He leads his middle-aged "Fasting Friar" to recognize the dangers of sensual denial in time to admit love and passion into his life. In the latter unpublished "The Coyote Hunt" he makes a beautiful but sexually repressed young girl undergo the same experience while she has much more time than Walter Ackroyd to enjoy an emotionally fulfilled life. However, the middle aged protagonist of "No Snow on the Mountain," the last novel he wrote before his death from cancer, makes that discovery too late; like Mr. Duffy in James Joyce's story "A Painful Case," he had rejected love when it was offered to him and now "he gnawed the rectitude of his life; he felt that he had been outcast from life's feast."[37]

The parallels between McCourt's personal experience and his fiction extend beyond theme and characterization. The symbolic significance attached to hills and prairie in the stories and novels is not merely a literary device but a record of his own intensely felt and ambivalent reaction to landscape. For him the prairie was simultaneously associated with a restrictive reality and imaginative freedom, hills or mountains with emotionally inspiring mysteries and unendurable grandeur. A successful professor at the University of New Brunswick, he suffered (like Jim Armstrong) from claustrophobia among Fredericton's hills and took the first opportunity to move back to the prairie where he remained until his death, despite efforts to

[37]"A Painful Case," *Dubliners* (New York: Compass, 1958), p. 117.

lure him to balmy British Columbia. On the dust jacket of his travel book *Saskatchewan* he says, "I am a confirmed Westerner — always a little uncomfortable except when surrounded by empty plains and sky."[38] One finds ample proof of this manifesto in the book but also passages in which he criticizes the prairie for having exactly those qualities he says he cannot live without. The description of the provincial capital is a good example: "No cities with the possible exception of Sodom and Gomorrah have ever been founded in less congenial physical surroundings than Regina, the Queen City of Saskatchewan. On every side the plains unroll without a wrinkle to the horizon; no trees grow anywhere except those planted by man and assiduously tended thereafter. . . ." (p. 83)

If he had a love-hate relationship with the plains, McCourt's emotional response to hills and mountains was equally mixed. His first glimpse of the rockies affected him exactly as they move Neil Armstrong although he could not live among them. In *Saskatchewan* he admits that the Cypress Hills, that exotic outcropping of buttes, plateaus and ridges which sprouts unexpectedly from the prairie in the southwest corner of the province, cast "a permanent and in a sense inexplicable spell" over him, that this region "excites the most powerful emotions and promotes the most extravagant dreams" although it "has never been a part of my daily life" (p. 71). In his fiction and in his life McCourt moved restlessly between two worlds — the spiritual and the material, the imaginative and the real, the emotional and the intellectual, the mountains and the plains — never completely at home in either but striving to grasp and hold the best of both.

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[38]*Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968). All future references to this work will be given in the text.