THE LYRICISM OF W.O. MITCHELL'S **WHO HAS SEEN THE WIND**

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In studies of Canadian Prairie literature and in surveys of the development and outstanding achievements of Canadian fiction, W.O. Mitchell's novel *Who Has Seen the Wind* has been uniformly praised for its lyrically evocative style. Edward McCourt comments that Mitchell's prose, "for subtle cadence and freshness of imagery, is a delight to the mind and ear,"[1] and Desmond Pacey remarks, "Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the novel is its style: it is poetic and evocative without ever seeming pretentious or contrived."[2] More recently Ronald Sutherland[3] and Dick Harrison[4] have isolated the style of the book as its most praise-worthy feature, and Laurence Ricou has drawn attention to the "lyrically captivating phrases"[5] of the novel's last two pages. The interests of most of these commentators have tended to be primarily thematic rather than stylistic, so that observations about style have either gone undocumented, or were supported simply by quoting a 'poetic passage' or two from the novel without any attempt to analyzing the style to account for the lyric effect. Yet those defining features of the lyric mode that combine to create the requisite "single, unified impression"[6] — the subjective, personal and imaginative view of a subject, the intense, even ecstatic, emotion evoked in the lyrical writer by the subject, and the careful attention paid to the music in the sounds of the words by which the subject is expressed — all these features of lyricism are clearly identifiable in the most memorable passages of *Who Has Seen the Wind.*

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[1]*The Canadian West in Fiction* (1949; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970), p. 105.
[2]*Creative Writing in Canada*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1961), p. 225.
[3]*Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec/Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New Press, 1971), pp. 93 & 105.
[4]*Unnamed Country* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977). pp. 174 & 178.
[5]"Notes on Language and Learning in *Who Has Seen the Wind*," *Canadian Children's Literature*, 10 (1977-78), p. 16.
[6]C. Hugh Holman, "Lyric," *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980), p. 252.

One part of a report of an interview with W. O. Mitchell by Patricia Barclay focuses on his lyrical prose style and particularly on his awareness of the intimate connection between music and the lyric, suggesting that he feels that a truly lyrical prose will exhibit formal or structural affinities with music, as well as being musical in sound. She reports:

> Mitchell is keenly interested in poetry. He even wishes he were a poet, and says that he often scans his lines for atmospheric or lyric effect. He is also interested in the formal resemblances between music and prose in such areas as motif, repetition and pattern.[7]

None of Mitchell's work to date exemplifies these interests better than *Who Has Seen the Wind.*

There are many passages in the novel that haunt the reader's imagination because of their rhythmic qualities and musical sounds. The narrator's comparison of the Ben's amorality with that of the wind is one such passage: "The Ben had about as much moral conscience as the prairie wind that lifted over the edge of the prairie world to sing mortality to every living thing."[8] The predominantly rising meter is an appropriate expression of the lifting wind, and the trochaic falling rhythm of "moral conscience" metrically reinforces the alien quality of this element to the prairie world. The consonantal and assonantal effects of the first part of the sentence are supported by a correspondence of accent: the Ben / about; had / about; much / moral. The parallel phrases with their modulation of the final word in the sequence from 'wind' to 'world' are similarly metrically reinforced: as the prairie wind / of the prairie world. As the sentence settles into a regular iambic rhythm, the effects of rhyme also begin to operate in the two sets of three rhymes: prairie / mortality / every, and sing / living / thing.

The poetry of the prairies is nowhere better captured than in the description of the landscape on the final pages of the book. Rewriting the lines in verse form helps emphasize their inherent lyrical qualities. The rhyme, alliteration, consonance and assonance, combined with both syntactical structures inverted for

[7]"Regionalism and the Writer: A Talk with W.O. Mitchell," *Canadian Literature,* 14 (Autumn 1962), p. 56.
[8]W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p. 31. All future references to the novel will be to this edition.

heightened rhetorical impact and metrical effects designed to enhance meaning, attest to a creator whose ear is finely attuned to sound:

> High above the prairie,
> platter-flat,
> the wind wings on,
> bereft and wild its lonely song.
> It ridges drifts
> and licks their ripples off;
> it smoothens crests,
> piles snow against the fences.
> . . . . . .
> A meadow lark sings
> and it is spring.
> And summer comes.
> A year is done.
> Another comes
> and it is done.
>
> Where spindling poplars lift
> their dusty leaves
> and wild sunflowers stare,
> the gravestones stand
> among the prairie grasses.
> Over them a rapt
> and endless silence lies.
> This soil is rich. (p. 300, modified lineation)

The internal rhyme of 'platter-flat,' the half rhymes of 'on' and 'son,' of 'sings' and 'spring,' of 'comes' and 'done,' the onomatopoeic alliteration of "the wind wings . . . / wild," the predominance of short 'i' sounds in the lines "It ridges drifts / and licks their ripples off," and of sibilants in the last stanza, all bespeak a careful attention to melodic effects. Mitchell emphasizes the 'platter-flatness' of the prairie by moving the modifier from its normal syntactical position before the noun, necessitating pauses before and after the enunciation of 'platter-flat.' Moreover, the importance and potency of the wind are conveyed by the variation in meter from the regular trochees to the three heavy stresses that fall on the words 'wind wings on.' Then a regular iambic pattern sets in that is broken only to avoid metrical monotony or to highlight meaning. The rhythmic march of the iambs is, for example, broken by the spondee 'piles snow' for obvious mimetic reasons, and the slowed rhythm that is enforced by the three heavy

stresses that fall on the line "This soil is rich" conveys the deep sense of conviction with which this statement is uttered.

Emotional intensity in the novel is established and sustained by a variety of devices employed by the lyric poet: Mitchell makes frequent use of synaesthesia, particularly striking imagery and figurative language and marries sound and sense as well in the fashion we have already observed. His narrator characteristically fuses sensations of sight, touch, and sound. The choice of the preposition 'against' makes darkness appear palpable in the description of Maggie's behaviour when, anxious about her son's mental and physical health after Miss MacDonald's threatening him with God's punishment, "she lay awake with her eyes against the dark for a long time" (p. 95). The oppression of the spirit and the sense of tension in the character are thus admirably conveyed. The absence of all sound and movement is so deeply felt at other points in the novel that stillness, too, becomes almost tangible. Hence the narrator observes that a cuckoo clock "poked the stillness nine times" (p. 20), and that a screen door "slapped the stillness" (p. 26).

The striking originality of some of the images found in *Who Has Seen the Wind* can be illustrated by reference to the often quoted opening sentence of the book: "Here was the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky — Saskatchewan prairie" (p. 3). There is something approaching a metaphysical conceit in the notion that prairie sky is to the land below it as fractional numerator is to denominator. Furthermore, the idea that land and sky are the skeletal requirements of nature, leads to the implication that the human presence fleshes out prairie nature, gives it significance, and makes it truly come alive.

The lyric mode's subjective, personal, and imaginative view of a subject which is often expressed through figurative language is observable in the extended metaphor of sunset as fire in the penultimate paragraph of the last chapter of Part One:

> Shadows lengthen; the sunlight fades from cloud to cloud, kindling their torn edges as it dies from softness to softness down the prairie sky. A lone farmhouse window briefly blazes; the prairie bathes in mellower, yellower light, and the sinking sun becomes a low and golden glowing on the prairie's edge (p. 61).

The sunlight 'kindling' the edges of clouds is mirrored in a farmhouse window so that the glass 'blazes' until the flame subsides to its final form, a 'glowing' on the prairie's edge.

The visual effects of this metaphoric passage are paired with carefully contrived structures and sounds. The harmony of the parallel phrases "fades from cloud to cloud" and "dies from softness to softness" is supported by the half-rhyme of 'dies' and 'sky'. In the following sentence, the repetition of the 'b' sounds in 'briefly blazes' and 'bathes,' of 's' sounds in 'sinking sun,' and of 'g' sounds in 'golden glowing' helps strengthen the melodic effect produced by the immediately adjacent triple rhyming words 'mellower, yellower,' the middle rhyme of which is picked up in 'low' and 'glowing' in the latter part of the sentence. The predominance of the 'l' and 'o' sounds in the passage also helps to create an atmosphere of softness that is carried on into the concluding paragraph of Part One.

This latter paragraph is particularly notable for its sound effects, both observing and creating a sense of contrast between the horses' noises, the stubble crackle and the kildeer call, all of which are heard against the predominant evening hush. The frequent pauses marked by the punctuation stylistically reproduce the effects of sound against silence. There is a similar sort of contrast in the visual image of the sharp outlines of objects etched against the natural canvas of the prairie sky.

> The horses' heads move gently up and down; their hoofs drop tired sound; the jingle of the traces swinging at their sides is clear against the evening hush. The stubble crackles; a kildeer calls. Stooks, fences, horses, man, have clarity that was not theirs throughout the day (p. 61).

There is a shift to the present tense in the last two paragraphs of Part One from the past tense employed in the preceding paragraph which describes the death of a tan burgher. This shift evokes the "prairie eternity"[9] as does a parallel shift that Ricou has noted in a very similar passage near the end of the last chapter of the book:

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[9]Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 105.

> Some day. The thing could not hide from him forever. A startled jack rabbit leaped suddenly into the air ahead of him. Ears ridiculously erect, in seeking spurts now to one side, now to the other, it went bounding idiotically out over the prairie. The day grays, its light withdrawing from the winter sky till just the prairie's edge is luminous (pp. 299-300).

The tan burgher squeaking a question to the wind while "shadows lengthen" (p. 61) in Part One is paralleled here by Brian's quest to understand "the thing," the nature of life and the divine, and by the jack rabbit that runs in "seeking spurts" as it bounds ahead of the boy before disappearing into the prairie as the "day grays." Light and shadow, sound and silence, are once more contrasted in the passage at the end of the novel, just as they had been in the earlier passage. These similarities of content and form contribute to the sense of a unified structure based on cycle, but they are also a part of the novel's musical patterning which is based on the principle of repetition.

In fact, cycle and the repetition of cyclic phenomena are the chief structural characteristics of the novel. In the metaphorical description of the prairie evening cited above, the dying of the light, itself part of a cyclic recurrence, appropriately follows the description of an animal death whose link with cycle is suggested by the "lazing circles" of the hawk: "In the summer sky there, stark blue, a lonely goshawk hung. It drifted low in lazing circles. A pause — one swoop — galvanic death to a tan burgher no more to sit amid his city's grained heaps and squeak a question to the wind" (pp. 60-61). This kind of observation of the fabric of natural life on the prairie is not merely lyric window dressing; it reinforces the sense of cycle and interconnectedness of life that is a primary thematic focus of the novel.

The Barclay interview with Mitchell reveals that motif is one of the formal devices in which the novelist is most interested, but Mitchell has mixed success in handling motif. Recurrent images of entrapment provide an example of his penchant for *leitmotif,* but also an instance of stylistic concerns overriding thematic integrity. In Chapter Eight, Brian's relatively harmless and temporary confrontations with school conventions and rules is juxtaposed with Young Ben's more serious and chronic confrontation with them, and both confrontations are linked to the most serious and perennial of the conflicts confrontations between Bens and the

conventions and laws of society; Brian just does not understand the rigidity and shrillness of Miss MacDonald; and the Young Ben, brought up in an environment of total oblivion to rules, is necessarily at odds with a classroom situation. Ironically, even Digby, the enforcer of school rules, is in some ways troubled by school and social conventions. He is thus uneasy with his role as socializer and worries about his jobs being nothing more than the task of regulating students' lives with bells, trimming off "the uncomfortable habits, the unsocial ones — or was it simply the ones that interfered with . . . ?" (p. 73). The image of the trapped fly battering itself against a window pane in a repeatedly frustrated attempt to escape is used to convey the idea of Digby's and Brian's collisions with convention:

> For some time after Brian had left, Digby sat at his desk. On the half-opened window behind him a fly, lulled to languor by the morning sun, bunted crazily up the pane, fell protestingly, and lay half-paralyzed on the sill, the numbness of his sound lost in the emptiness of the office (p. 75).

Because Mitchell then turns to consider the Young Ben and his father, they, too, are implicitly associated with the image, and the blurring of degrees of entrapment begins. In a later chapter Miss Thompson recognizes the Young Ben's predicament and explicitly links him with the motif of trapped creatures:

> She tried to name for herself the expression that was in his triangular face; thought of a person caught naked in a public assembly — looked into the narrow, gray eyes, and suddenly knew — it was the look that lies in the eyes of a caught thing. . . .
> School was an intolerable incarceration for him, made bearable only by flights of freedom . . . (p. 147).

The diction of that sentence is carefully chosen to accord with the most important symbol of entrapment in the novel, the owl. Diction is also used to link the owl's caging to the Ben's imprisonment and the parallels between the situations of the owl and the Bens are quite legitimately established by the use of the entrapment motif. Visiting the Bens' place, Brian sees the owl, hears "a wild, harsh hissing," and notes that the owl's blinking eyelids are like those of "an old, gray man, . . . the

pupils . . . dead-black with nothing in them to tell that they lived" (p. 255). Fascinated, Brian stands and observes the owl more closely. Mitchell's description here bears many of the hallmarks of his lyric style. Brian is described as standing

> . . . for minutes with the insistent, persistent husking in his ears . . . [and being] suddenly aware that the gray wing-shoulders were weaving tirelessly from side to side in a frantically uneasy glide born of restraint, a soul-burning compulsion that stirred within him an ineffable urge to tear the netting away (p. 255).

Note the recurrent metrical patterns (aware that the gray / compulsion that stirred / ineffable urge / the netting away) sometimes supported by rhyme (as in the first and last phrases quoted above, and in 'from side to side' / 'uneasy glide'), the sibilance and the onomatopoeia of the owl's "insistent, persistent husking incessantly."

The Ben in jail is first linked with the owl when he is described this way: "Compelled from within himself, he moved like all caged things" (p. 262). Later Brian reinforces the strength of the link by observing: "the Ben's breathing [was] harsh with a shrill edge to its rhythm. The huskiness was familiar" (p. 276).

The owl and the Bens all gain their freedom at about the same time, but not, regrettably, before Mitchell draws other characters into the operative field of his entrapment motif. After looking at the imprisoned Ben, Brian seems to conclude that Saint Sammy must be trapped in some manner too, because the narrator remarks of Brian: "The Ben's wild eyes made him think of Saint Sammy, and it was on a Saturday in early summer, after seeing the Ben through the cell window, that Brian decided to pay a visit to Saint Sammy out on the prairie" (p. 262).

Sean and Maggie are also trapped in suffering; Maggie grieves over the loss of her husband, but Sean has known Saint Sammy's kind of suffering as well as having lost a brother. Just as Brian will later watch the owl, so he watches his uncle:

> . . . Sean, his great, roaring uncle with his deep and booming voice hardly a whisper now, and his fierce eyes like ringed knot-holes, no longer fierce — just hurt.
> It was the same look that lay in his mother's eyes, the dull apathy of a trapped thing that has given up the struggle (p. 243).

Even the yearnings of the Young Ben for the rifle and Mr. Digby for Miss Thompson are expressed through reference to the motif. Mitchell first draws parallels between the two yearnings: "there was no doubt that the Young Ben wanted the gun badly, and the yearning that the Young Ben must feel found its match in the school principal. Digby also wanted something badly. He wanted Miss Thompson" (p. 207). Then Mitchell shows us how Digby is caught by more than his desire for the woman. Digby dreams of getting "away from four walls and a ceiling — the same room to be slept in, eaten in, gone-away-from, come-back-to — same damn cage" (pp. 207-208). The relative triviality of Digby's desires and the Young Ben's yearning for the gun as compared to the boy's longing for freedom from school and the conventions it represents, makes the linking of the two situations by a common motif inappropriate.

While the motif of the cage or trap has the virtue of tying together several distinct incidents, the impact of the motif is considerably lessened by its being linked to situations that are qualitatively different. The incarcerations of the Ben in jail and the Young Ben in school are of a totally different order than the 'imprisonments' of Maggie, Sean, Saint Sammy and Digby in their personal losses, lacks, and sufferings. Important distinctions are here blurred by Mitchell's fascination with "the formal resemblances between music and prose in such areas as motif, repetition and pattern" (Barclay, p. 56) because prose theme is of a different order than musical theme.

Such betrayals of thematic integrity by stylistic concerns are rare, however; more commonly, Mitchell's lyric sense enriches and supports his thematic concerns while expressing his imaginative and emotionally charged view of the prairie and its life.

The Bible is the source of one of the most successfully handled motifs of *Who Has Seen the Wind,* scripture first entering the fabric of the novel through the epigraph from Psalm 103: 15-16: "As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. / For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more." These verses both point up one of the major themes of the book, the beautiful but transitory nature of human existence, and call attention to several of the natural images which become *leitmotifs* themselves, the grass and flowers mutable and mortal, and thus symbolic of man, and the wind unchangeable

and eternal, and therefore representative of God. The context of the verses from *Psalms* is important, because the next verse of Psalm 103 reads, "But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him. . . ."

Mitchell was clearly thinking of the Psalm when he recorded Brian's thoughts about the prairie's being awful: "in his mind there loomed vaguely fearful images of a still and brooding spirit, a quiescent power unsmiling from everlasting to everlasting to which the coming and passing of the prairie's creatures was but incidental" (pp. 128-129). The verbal motif recurs when Brian tries to come to terms with his father's death, in the context of a passage which contrasts a series of 'forevers' and 'nevers,' the latter giving rise to the memory of the 'nevers' of Shakespeare's Lear. The most significant stylistic feature of the passage is, however, a lyric repetition of both words and syntactical structures, a repetition which here as elsewhere is designed to reflect the sense of cycle:

> People were forever born; people forever died, and never were again. Fathers died and sons were born; the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering through the long, dead grasses, through the long and endless silence. Winter came and spring and fall, then summer and winter again; the sun rose and set again, and everything that was once — was again — forever and forever. But for man, the prairie whispered — never — never. For Brian's father — never. . . . There were no catches of breath, simply tears as he stood alone in the silence that stretched from everlasting to everlasting (pp. 246-247).

Images of light and dark introduced early in the book and recurring frequently become another of the novel's *leitmotifs.* From the strong sun of the prairies that opens the book, the narrator moves to focus his attention on the dark cave where Brian is pretending to be an ant. The light streaming through the stained-glass window when Brian visits the church is described as "shearing the church dusk" (p. 23), and the dust motes in the air as they travel "from outer darkness, across the light, and into nothingness again" (p. 23) have symbolic resonances of man who comes from dust and unto dust shall return. The spirea leaf's "dark lip of shadow" and the drop of water with its "star's cold light" (p. 107) represent a recurrence of the motif, as do Grandmother MacMurray's knowing her life "for a firefly spark in much darkness" (p. 187), and Saint Sammy's observation of God's preoccupation

with "lightening and darkening His earth by slipping the melting edges of slow clouds over the prairie" (p. 263).

In the style and structure, motifs and music of *Who Has Seen the Wind* Mitchell's declared interests in the similarities between verbal lyricism and music find their fullest expression. If his undoubted success with these aspects of the novel had been matched by a corresponding success in the handling of theme and character, *Who Has Seen the Wind* would merit much more than the epithet 'minor classic' which best describes its place in the Canadian canon today.

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