

**FERN HILL REVISITED:
ISOLATION AND DEATH IN
THE MOUNTAIN AND THE VALLEY**

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*The world washed in his imagination,
The world was a shore, whether sound or form
Or light, the relic of farewells,
Rock, of valedictory echoings,
To which his imagination returned,
From which it sped, a bar in space,
Sand heaped in the clouds, giant that fought
Against the murderous alphabet:
The swarm of thoughts, the swarm of dreams
Of inaccessible Utopia.
A mountainous music always seemed
To be falling and to be passing away.*

—Wallace Stevens
from "The Man With The Blue Guitar"

In his introduction to *The Mountain and the Valley*, Claude Bissell asserts that, although Buckler does present us "in one way . . . with another portrait of the artist as a young man," the novel is, above all else, "a study of human relations as they work themselves out in the family, separated by deep personal differences, and yet united by love and affection"¹ Bissell further emphasizes this familial theme when he insists that "It is the very strength and sureness of Buckler's treatment of the family that makes the last section of the book something of an anti-climax . . . The study of human community threatens to become a study of human isolation" (p. xii). However, Buckler's imagery in his portrait of the Canaan family reveals that *The Mountain and the Valley* is from beginning to end "a study of

¹Claude Bissell, "Introduction" to *The Mountain and the Valley* (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1970), p. xi. All subsequent quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition and will be immediately followed in the text by their respective page numbers.

human isolation” and that the last section of the novel offers the inevitable climax of character and event for which the reader has been prepared throughout.

Buckler portrays the artist (or potential artist) as the most isolated individual of all as David Canaan becomes increasingly aware of the cacophony rather than the harmony of human existence and is unable to do anything about it. David struggles in vain against the chains of the “human community” in the valley, chains forged, ironically, from the nature of the very “love and affection” to which Bissell alludes. Buckler’s “praise of family” is *always* undermined by his ironic vision of life in the valley and of the relationship that exists between the family (community) and the creative individual.

Bissell quotes from Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill” in order to confirm the positive aspects of the novel: “And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves/Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,/And the sabbath rang slowly/In the pebbles of the holy streams” (p. xii). But this particular stanza of the poem does not reveal how Thomas’s felicitous vision fades, and thus the true analogy between poem and novel is missed: despite the halcyon days, and despite art—“Fern Hill) or David Canaan’s potential novel—“Time” does hold us “green and dying” though we sing “in [our] chains like the sea.”²

The short, introductory chapter of *The Mountain and the Valley* is replete with images of isolation, futility, and death, but the reader does not at first realize that this chapter has to do with the last day of David Canaan’s life and is connected in time, place, and theme with the final chapter of the novel which is dominated by the same images. These two chapters of David’s “present” existence enclose his “past” experience described in the rest of the novel, just as the two mountains “shut the valley in completely” (p. 13) in terms of the physical setting of Buckler’s Entremont and the mental landscape of his various characters. Buckler could have easily begun the novel with the halcyon days of David’s childhood, but he does not; during his encounter with these halcyon days, the reader is meant to keep the images of the first chapter (entitled “Prologue—The Rug”) in mind even if he cannot fully realize their import. If he does so, “the

²Dylan Thomas, “Fern Hill,” in *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (London: Dent, 1952), p. 161.

magnificent paean to the wonder and innocence of youth" (p. xii) is held in a perspective that would not otherwise exist; as a result, the reader will not only pay closer attention to the flaws inherent in the seemingly perfect life of the Canaan family, but he will also be prepared from the outset for the inevitable changes in and decline of David's life.

The opening paragraph of the novel foreshadows such change and decline as the reader glimpses David at the age of thirty:

As far back as childhood, whenever anger had dishevelled him, or confusion, or the tick, tick, tick, of emptiness like he felt today, he had sought the log road that went to the top of the mountain. As he moved along this road, somewhere the twist of anger would loosen; a shaft of clarity would strike through the scud of confusion; blood would creep back into the pulse and pallor of the emptiness. He would take happiness there, to be alone with it; as another child might keep hidden for a day a toy that wasn't his. (p. 13)

David's isolation is evident: when he is angry or confused he goes out to be alone on the log road; "clarity" comes from being alone, and "happiness" is sustained by loneliness. The futility of his condition is emphasized by Buckler's particular choice of words: it is only "a shaft of clarity" that is opposed to the not easily-dispersed "scud of confusion"; David's "blood" would only "creep" through the "emptiness"; and his sense of happy isolation cannot last just as a child cannot forever hide the toy that is not his (presumably he can either give it up or destroy it). It is winter, the season of death, and David's eye is attuned to "the flat frozen fields" and to "the gaunt limbs of the maples which could be seen like the bones of hands" (p. 13); he is experiencing a dull pain in his head, and death is suggested in Buckler's metaphor for this pain: "Occasionally he moved his head from side to side, as a deer does that tries to dislodge, by the flick of tongue to flank, the bullet wound that hurts and puzzles him" (p. 14). Finally, David stands in a death-like trance in which "any impulse to movement receded before the compulsion of the emptiness" (p. 14).

Against this death is the movement and creativity of his grandmother as she hooks a rug, something she will do (has done) continually during the halcyon days. Ellen's rugs (an art form) seem to provide a needed if unconsciously perceived nucleus for the gradually disintegrating lives of the members of the Canaan household when David's creative insights and efforts fail to do so. Now she is

close to completing her last rug (will finish it in the "Epilogue"), but the gap between creative effort and life seems to widen as she comes to the innermost "concentric circles." What is the relationship between art and life when Ellen, making art from the lives of the Canaan family (parents and children) has to ask herself where these lives have gone? She is only confused when she wonders what has happened to Joseph, Martha, Chris, and Anna; if the reader does not ignore this confusion behind the sense of order seemingly provided by the rugs during the "green and golden" times, then s/he will recognize and approve of the connection between Ellen's final uncertainty—"Where was David" (p. 18—and the dazzling, attractive, but nevertheless confused "scud" of David's final thoughts in life.

The "green and golden" times begin when David is eight years old. Everything seems perfect on the Canaan family farm and in the valley around it; a harmony exists, apparently, between members of the family, and between themselves and their natural surroundings. Buckler pays tribute to this harmony: "The whole morning glistened fresh as the flesh of an alder sapling when the bark was first peeled from it to make a whistle. It glinted bright as the split-rock maple, flashing for a minute in the sun as it was tossed onto the woodpile" (p. 19). The accuracy of such imagery and the sense of light which permeates it arouse no suspicions in the reader; it is a good morning in the community of Entremont. However, other images of this morning are less concrete and more ambiguous in their meaning. David is being allowed to go, for the first time, to the fishing camp on the mountain; he is tremendously excited about such a communal experience to be shared with his father and brother, but his greatest happiness has to do with an anticipation of isolation, and his thoughts contrast with the glistening morning: "He'd never seen anything but the mouth of the dark log road before; but today they'd walk on it, farther and farther into the deep, safe, unfathomable, magically-sleeping woods. The voices from the houses would be soundless and far-off. The only sound would be the soft undulant hush of darkness" (p. 19). Even the sharing of the experience contributes directly to the distance between individuals implied by these images of darkness and sleep; though the reader does not yet know about David's "words" and the silence that surrounds them, Buckler lays the ground for such knowledge: "Yet, somehow, having his father and Chris *with* him would make him more securely alone with his mind's shining population than ever" (p. 20).

In his description of Joseph and Martha Canaan, Buckler further reveals the distinction between the initial sound and sense of his language (which creates its own series of surface images) and the connotations of it (which reverberate beyond sound and surface imagery). The kitchen of the farmhouse is "the perimeter of Martha's whole life" (p. 23); Buckler describes the sun shining in this room in all seasons, touching even in winter "the handle of the stove lifter or the curve of a rocker or a hand." It is a place of contentment for Martha, and for Joseph it is "like an anchor: the one small corner safe from the sweat of the fields and the fret of the seasons" (p. 23). This is the farmhouse kitchen of everyman's imagination—the eye of the storm with fresh apple pies and mother-love, the slow easy space in an otherwise frenetic world. However, in the midst of his praise, Buckler subtly undermines such perfection through his repeated implication of disparity between appearance and reality: "It was the kitchen the sun *seemed* to seek out the year round . . . When the day's work was done and supper over, the kitchen *seemed* to smile . . . The kitchen's heart would *seem* to beat with a great peace then. The paths of the day which had been separate for each . . . melted together. The breath of them all *seemed* to lift in one single breath" (pp. 22, 23, italics mine).

If the entire kitchen passage is read carefully, the "love and affection" therein mingles with undercurrents of "human isolation." When she is alone in this room and "without speech," Martha is happy because "her tasks are like a kind of conversation" (p. 24); she does not need to talk to others in order to "come alive," and her mind obviously has its own "shining population," however limited it is in comparison to David's. But the walls of the kitchen are not just familiar family borders; they are also barriers against human intercourse: "When she was outside it she felt strange . . . If the strangers, with different tread and different plans and other thoughts, should ever come to inhabit it, all the light would go out of its face" (p. 23). Then Buckler talks about Joseph—his strength, his lack of fear, the respect he has in the community, his kindness and tenderness; the man seems a paragon of the independent farmer, the perfect complement to the fresh apple pies and Martha. Again, though, Buckler depends on the connotations of his description to reveal the deeper condition of things: Joseph is a man of few words; in fact, Buckler says his "life beat" is "inarticulate." More important, perhaps, he acts the same way with others as he does when he is alone, and

there is an intractability to his action, "a kind of stubborn thoughtlessness to alter circumstances" (p. 26) which causes the reader to wonder how Joseph would perceive that flexibility and co-operation are necessary in certain situations. Because Martha and Joseph do not realize that they are locked into a ritual of behaviour, they are rendered more vulnerable when strangers inevitably walk into their kitchen.

In these first comments on David's parents, it is Martha who is presented as being more aware of her condition; she is described as existing within an arena of contentment and as being familiar with its borders. Joseph, on the other hand, appears to lack even a rudimentary self-awareness; the only borders to his movements seem to be those of his experience in the valley, but he is unaware of all the frontiers he crosses between the kitchen and the mountain road. Despite this difference, however, they *both unconsciously* accept and appreciate the order and pleasant pattern that *seem* to be in their lives; they share a well of silence between and around them which quietly absorbs undefined thoughts, absolving them of responsibility to anything but the present moment and preventing them from the anticipation of future noise.

David had his own fascination with the present moment: "As they came close to the mountain, it was so exciting David was almost afraid. He almost wished there was some way he could save it. The second time was never as good . . . He thought, we could do this every day! We will! We'll come back here . . . every day!" (pp. 28, 29) He also shares his parents' well of silence but this is because, unlike them, he is self-aware to the point of being self-conscious: "When he was alone with his father, he didn't know what to say. The quick things in his mind sounded foolish even to himself . . . David would be struck shy when he started to talk; and then, when he didn't speak true to his thoughts, he'd feel as if he were keeping a secret from the person he could most trust" (p. 27). But the silence is broken by "voices" announcing the deaths of Pete Delahunt and Spurge Gorman on the log drive, and David, for all his perception, cannot prevent or alleviate such noise.

The sudden intrusion of these deaths into David's perfect day, and into yet another perfect day for Martha and Joseph, marks the beginning of the Canaan family's loss of immunity to forces beyond its comprehension and immediate experience (especially through its subsequent interaction with the surviving Delahunts and Gormans).

When the men return too early from the drive, Martha, her arena of contentment too easily upset by Rachel Gorman's snide gossip, searches the group "frantically" for Joseph and her sons; she has always believed in the inviolability of events and relationships within the arena but this is the first indication that doubt and panic can intrude. On the way home, Joseph and the other men use language as "an instrument of disguise" so that the reality of death will not penetrate their lives; as a result, each man is more alone with the shock he is busy denying. At this time, only Ellen is investigating life beyond the "perimeter," and in a way that includes rather than excludes others, by telling David's sister Anna about the runaway sailor she once hid and fed in the barn.

Ellen steps outside the present moment and herself as Martha and Joseph never do: "Her face forgot itself like a face struck, at first waking, with the memory of the night's dream of some time when you were another person. You lie there, listening intently for a sound that you know will never come again" (p. 34). If this journey beyond the "perimeter" is Ellen's own way of accommodating the unexpected (something that probably began, in terms of thought, with the death of her husband Richard), then it is important that the reader recognize that it is not something from which Anna can benefit. The isolation of Ellen's experience with a sailor years before is linked to the isolation of Anna's future experience with Toby, but symbolically rather than literally; the first incident foreshadows the second but in no way influences or prevents it. Hence Ellen's own larger perception of events and relationships, as in the creative linking of isolated experience in her rug-making, leads her to an articulation of life's unsuspected intricacies, but she remains helpless before life's inevitabilities.

Buckler presents David as someone capable of similar articulation but also as one whose voice seeks to contain and therefore control the inevitabilities. What David is up against is emphasized by the valley community's entrapment in the haze of the present moment. At first, "hiatus fell over the place. Spurge and Peter possessed everyone's mind with a curious kind of distinctiveness the living lacked—as if, by dying, they had achieved their first clear outline of identity" (p. 42). Buckler leaves no doubt that death is the unacknowledged "perimeter" of valley life as the inhabitants think briefly and "for the first time, what it was to be alive"; but the "hiatus" closes, filled in by the "ritual" of behaviour, and then "Swiftly as a breeze, Peter and Spurge passed from fact to memory. The chord

with the living began to ravel. Now the grass was ordinary grass only. The fields became familiar weekday fields again" (p. 44). Death is a "fact," but the ravelling chord suggests that the true power of the "perimeter" is denied, that is, its ability to violate the haze of the present moment with a painful and sometimes fatal clarity. Words are David's alternative to death as the "clear outline of identity," something with which he can create a present moment that cannot be violated; but his failure to make this alternative viable for himself and for others in the valley only contributes to the shortened life-span of the halcyon days and leads David to his final impotent position on the mountain.

Even as the "chains" become more visible to the reader, they are tightening around David and the other characters in the novel. With Bess's daughter, Effie, David is "tongue-tied" as the silence reasserts itself after her father's funeral; then he remembers the school play in which he and Effie are to appear together, and they begin to speak their dialogue from the play. David's intention for art (or, at this time in his life, his intention for words), that art *replace* life, is revealed when art and life collide. It is when the word "father" in the play conflicts with the meaning of "father" in Effie's life that the substitutive nature of the play's words becomes obvious. The words are meant to isolate those who use them, to protect them from life's vagaries, to be used as "an instrument of disguise."

Buckler is concerned with showing that David, despite his attraction to and gift for words, is not so markedly different from the rest of the Canaan family in his relationship to the silence. The failure of words in David's comforting of Effie is followed immediately by a consideration of the basically inarticulate nature of David's elder brother Chris as he tries to comfort Charlotte Gorman for the loss of *her* father: "He nodded, and moved awkwardly away. Speech between them was always halting. It was as if they thought in one language but had to speak in another, choosing only those words their clumsy mastery of the second language could translate" (p. 48). As Martha and Joseph react in their own way to the death of Pete and Spurge, Buckler suggests, rather than directly reveals, how words can betray them. Martha makes a patronizing remark about Bess Delahunt and Joseph sharply defends Bess. David's silent response to their exchange underlines the ambiguity of words in the Canaan family life and intimates to the reader that any order in the conver-

sations between Martha and Joseph is accidental and beyond individual control:

David glanced, alerted, at his mother's face.

Sometimes when his father spoke sharply, there'd be no open quarrel, but her face would look as if everything retreated behind her lips and eyes. For a day or two after that his father's voice didn't seem to reach her at all.

But this was one of the times when savagery of his father's expression struck her the alternate way . . .

[Joseph] smiled too. He looked half-abashed . . . half-pleased that his remark had turned out to be a funny one. (p. 50)

Meanwhile, Ellen begins to hook a rug, and a positive relationship between art and life is implied as she tells Anna "some little thing about the garment from which each rag had come." However, once again words contribute to the silence that, this time, is being broken by Ellen's hook of creation: "'Grammie,' Anna said suddenly, 'what is "dead"?' Ellen's hook went slack" (p. 52). As Ellen attempts to explain the unexplainable to an eight-year-old girl, Buckler brilliantly captures, in their awkward and seemingly unnatural definition of death as being "like 'young'" (p. 52), the connection between death and the use of words in the valley. This definition presages the quicksand at the bottom of David's struggle with words: "like 'young'" will achieve its "clear outline of identity" in the deaths of Effie, Joseph, Martha, Toby, and finally David himself.

If the words of the play have not been able to alter life's harsh realities, as David and Effie give up these words when they recall the death of Effie's father, on stage they might have a different power and effect. In fact, Buckler's portrait of David-as-young-actor suitably prepares the reader for his later artistic difficulties and the time when "Instead of soothing David by allowing him to work out the conflicts within him, his writing [is] just another source of tension in his life."³ Even before he steps on stage, the words of the play isolate him and recall his desire to be "securely alone with his mind's shining population" on the mountain road: "The words were something no one else had . . . [and] gave him a . . . selfish sort of safety" (pp. 55, 56); compared to himself, others seemed "like people tied." David seems to have the capacity to "translate" life with words: "The words were

³J. M. Kertzer, "The Past Recaptured." *Canadian Literature*, LXV (Summer, 1975), 82.

a kind of refuge when the moment was bare, stripped right down to time and place . . . He thought of the words, too, when the moment was already brimming . . . to make the moment really spill over . . . and be doubly translated" (pp. 57, 58). But what is the quality of his translation? Here David's later failure to discover words commensurate with his response to life is foreshadowed:

They were more like in the haymow when the rain was on the roof; or under the tent he and Chris had made out of meal bags . . . or the moment in bed at night when his body and Chris's next it made a bundle of warmth in the shockingly cold blankets . . . *They were still more like* when his father took him with him to buy a pair of cattle . . . Or when the other men all came to help shoe the bad ox . . . Or were they most of all, he would think sometimes, *like* when Anna would fall asleep on the lounge . . . and he'd cover her up gently with a coat? (p. 59, italics mine)

There is not only an indecision here on David's part, there is also a nebulous equation between the words and what they are supposed to evoke or represent. Before the school play takes place, David does not alter the daily language of the Canaan farm and, as a result, some of the basis for the "nebulous equation" is revealed; caught speaking in a foreign tongue, David quickly reverts to those sounds which promote rather than suggest possibilities of breaking the silence:

He was saying them to himself as he poked hay in to the cows. He didn't hear his father's footsteps behind him.

"That sounds all right," Joseph said.

But they sounded silly to David then. He stopped short. He tried to imitate his father's voice in the bam. "Git yer head back there, you damn . . ." he shouted at the black cow. (p. 76)

When David finally steps on stage to speak the words of the play, he is still involved in a valley life that is the result of the co-existence and interdependence of "human isolation" and "human community." The stage is no different from the "dark log road" where he is "securely alone" yet part of a communal experience:

He commanded the silence now, surely, masterfully. Now they all listened . . . He thought . . . I'm glad I'm not like the others now . . .

Oh, it was perfect now. He was creating something out of nothing. He was creating exactly the person the words in the

play were meant for. He had the whole world of make-believe to go to. They had only the actual, the one that came to them. (p. 80)

David is alone on the stage and the valley inhabitants are isolated from him as they watch him; this is the basic nature of their relationship and, in Buckler's view, to meddle with it is to be seared by its truth. David thinks "This was better than the cosiness of doing anything alone. He'd never do anything alone again. He'd take them with him always, in their watching. Closer somehow because they followed . . . Oh, this was perfect . . . understanding and showing them how everything was" (p. 81). Yet when he connects the two solitudes by kissing Effie—"That wasn't in the play, but that's how it would really be"—there is only humiliation and the illusion of art: "He saw the raw edges of the flimsy cardboard and the verdigris on the clasp weldings of Effie's rhinestone brooch . . . he felt the shame of having spoken the foolish words in this goddam foolish play . . . [and] he stumbled from the stage" (p. 82).

It is only after the play that the members of the Canaan family can be considered to be victims of the silence that surrounds them and not simply inhabitants of it; the failure of words, other than those which have to do with the "voices" of death, to breach this silence and prevent or alleviate their entrapment as victims has its matrix in the novel in David's first and ignominious defeat as a potential artist. After the play, the halcyon days are in a definite state of decline and, despite the occasional glimmer of hope in the rest of the novel, the "chains" irrevocably encircle the singers. David runs from the stage into the "no-man's-land" of isolation-without-words, a territory in which the members of his family are already trapped. No member of the family can say anything to prevent David's recognition of himself in this "no-man's-land" and that he is now "separated . . . from them a little" (p. 87). He begins his retreat into a silence from which he will never really emerge, despite his attempts to write, and Buckler emphasizes the impotency of the potential artist when David does not even have to write to break the silence: "Oh, if only it could happen again . . . He wished he could make out he wanted a drink and go downstairs and leave the door open when he came up again, but he couldn't. He wished he could put Chris's arm back over his shoulder, but he couldn't. He wished he could . . . say something to Anna—not just about this, just anything—but he couldn't" (p. 96, italics mine).

Buckler opens the second section of the novel (entitled "The Letter") with a chapter about death; the tone of this chapter permeates the subsequent chapters in the section concerned with David and Chris growing older and their encounter with sexual forces which should be life-enhancing. Even before the members of the Canaan family arrive at the community cemetery where they are to tend graves, Buckler's imagery suggests changes in valley life. Several years have passed since David's experience with the play, and while there appears to have been no dramatic alteration in the Canaan family *weltanschauung*, a slight shift in the state of things is indicated: "Close up, the potato rows were ragged. Sometimes the plough, dragged on its side to cover the seed, had lurched, and sometimes the shaggy feet of the horse had plunged into the row itself" (p. 87). Here there is little if any discretion between the initial sound and sense of Buckler's language and the connotations of it—the words mean exactly what they say. However, just as the members of the Canaan family—excluding David and Ellen—were always part of the surface images created by that initial sound and sense, for Martha, Joseph, and Chris the "perimeter" without connotations is still intact: "But from the house the rows looked perfectly straight and smooth" (p. 87).

As Martha and Joseph work together, clearing weeds and grass from the grave-sites, David's one salient thought about the dead—"They couldn't have been watching" (p. 92)—undermines their unconscious stance as (mountain) "climbers" in life who do not think of falling; but, of course, death also claims the climber who watches, and "the shiveringly matchless words 'died' and 'young'" (recalling the "like 'young'" image that previously connected death and isolation) echo in the awkward silence present in the scenes in which Chris and David emulate procreation. Buckler spends little time on the love-making of Chris and Charlotte, but because Chris is so like his father, dependent on the tangible aspect of things for their meaning, it is not perhaps too difficult for the reader to imagine that this is how Joseph and Martha might have first met in sexual embrace. If nothing can be gained from such an association at this point in the novel, it is later, when Chris and Charlotte have lost their unborn child, that Joseph and Martha, who have already lost the stillborn artist David, abandon each other. Thus this imagery of potency ("hope") has its origins in a graveyard and never loses its relation to death and isolation and, therefore, to infertility. Buckler never intends

that it should; he describes the short, unproductive liaison between David and Effie and simultaneously introduces the equally barren *ménage à trois* of Anna, Toby, and David from which no child will come.

The sexual exchange with Effie holds no promise for David and contradicts the tenets of his isolated existence: "There was no room anywhere inside him now where he could keep the things that sprang to life only at his turning of the lock. She too had a key" (p. 110). Buckler's treatment of their relationship—after the play, Effie only appears three times and the last time she is dying—certainly underscores David's inability to communicate and to prevent the invasion of silence in his life as well as that of his family. Immediately after David first makes love to Effie, he receives a letter from Toby out of which will come some happiness, but even more confusion, and the eventual breakdown rather than the initiation or preservation of relationships. The letter does indeed mark "some kind of turning point in his life"; it is because of Toby that David forces Effie into a damp field for the satisfaction of his male pride and is then forever haunted by guilt when he thinks that she dies of pneumonia brought on by his action.

This second section of the novel, which begins with a graveyard scene, leads on to the subsequent section (entitled "The Valley") which ends with Effie in her grave; but before *this* death Buckler openly commits himself for the first time to the eventual presentation of another. Joseph and Martha have an argument about Bess; Martha suspects Joseph and Bess because they have been laughing together at the school social, and she does not join in the laughter when Joseph generously pays extra money for Bess's pie:

And that night in bed, she said, 'You knew her pie.' She put the words in her own mouth, to be denied; then when she heard them spoken, some dreadful fascination forced her to act as if they were believed. She was impotent against the fascination of the silence . . . She watched Joseph stumbling against it, bewildered; but she was helpless to break it. Until a pain more riving than any before struck through her chest and, when it was spent, released them both into the most trusting peace they had ever known. Nothing could have made her believe that the silence was to come back on her, again, and again. (p. 117)

David is not directly linked to this passage by Buckler, but his grandmother, with whom he shares creative insights, is; Ellen awakens

to a silence in the night and now, like her grandson, is inarticulate before it: "For the first time in her life her mind wouldn't obey her. She couldn't make it focus, to tell her what had happened or where she was" (p. 117).

When Buckler returns again to Ellen's rug-making, to what D. O. Spettigue calls "... the abstracting power of symbol, the kind of pattern [she] weaves out of experience,"⁴ he once more raises doubts about the influence of creative effort or consciousness on valley life. The rugs do serve as "a kind of conversation link" between the spaces of the *new* house (which Buckler has built to signify the absolute vanishing of the old halcyon days, and in which David lives in "a cosy isolation of his own making"); there seems to be an order to Ellen's "canvas" that takes her beyond mere memory into an imaginative realm where an objective view of things is possible. Thus she can see, startled, how each member of the family "... carried hidden in his face the look of all the others" and, most important, that "David seemed to have no face of his own" (p. 123). But, for all this, Ellen has no power to change things; the change is elsewhere, and the canvas is always incomplete:

This was the day when, all sentience fled, all things of the country shed the last light of after-memory. Its unwithheld entirety stained as quietly as a shadow. It claimed, by its drawing stillness, that you could know it perfectly and so possess it; as you could not. It beckoned you, by its very undemanding, to touch what was unreachable. It asked you, because it had no heart or tongue, to feel you knew not what and to find words for what was inexpressible. (p. 119)

The first visit of Toby to the farm reveals the depth of David's confusion about and self-consciousness towards the efficacy of language that has existed since his failure in the school play. It is Toby who will one day provide a good part of the character model and inspiration for the only complete story David will ever write; but the failure of that story as a work of art, and as a catharsis for David, has its roots in the limitations of language as experienced by the younger David when he tries to talk to the younger Toby. Even before they can speak to each other with any degree of confidence, Buckler describes their condition in terms that cannot be separated from David's eventual and necessary burning of his completed story

⁴D. O. Spettigue, "The Way It Was," in *The Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. George Woodcock (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1970), p. 153.

in front of Toby: "Each felt a crippling embarrassment in the consciousness that the other was secretly comparing him with the self-portrait of his own words" (p. 134). Throughout Toby's visit there is "a tic of uncertainty at David's mouth" as he discovers how difficult it is to speak two different languages at once—in this case, the language of the city to Toby and the language of the valley to his family. He acts as an "interpreter" between what is outside (beyond) and inside the valley, but David cannot bridge with words the gap that lies between. It seems as if he has to speak one language or the other, even though he realizes that each one used alone isolates those who do not understand it and isolates the interpreter too. The connection between this inability to "translate" the rigid, immediate moment, to create a more flexible situation through the use of language, and David as a potential artist is finalized when the two boys start to walk to the top of the mountain.

David speaks of the mountain summit in words that predict exactly his artistic vision at the end of the novel: "You can see the whole valley up a ways farther . . . You can't hear a sound, but you can see the whole thing" (p. 144). In Toby's quick reply Buckler establishes doubts about the vision before it is experienced by David or the reader: "You can't see it as plain as you can when you're in there can you? . . . It isn't like it was a *real* mountain . . ." (p. 144). The essential problem and conflict for the potential artist is emphasized in this exchange: how to fuse "the imaginative and the ordinary, the illusory and the real, the subjective and objective, the self and others,"⁵ how to create a synthesis of the two disparate languages that are outside and inside the valley as well as oneself. Buckler uses the next three chapters of the novel ("The Rock," "The Scar," and "The Train") to amplify this problem and conflict as they are exacerbated in David's experience; before he does so, however, Buckler firmly connects David's mountain vision with death, silence, and isolation. After Effie dies, David's guilt over her death is associated with his building a camp at the top of the mountain and writing a book there: "The guilt [like Effie] soon passed *from voice to echo*. But it was the first thing he could tell *no* one. It taught him that secrecy about anything . . . made it a possession of curious inviolability, and tempted him to collect more" (p. 152, first italics mine).

⁵Kertzer, p. 82.

The last time the reader saw Ellen working on her "canvas," the articles of clothing she wove into the rug suggested an ultimate "pattern" of death and isolation: a black coat she had worn to the funeral of her first-born son, a pair of catalogue trousers that David had put on just once before retreating to his room in the face of his schoolmates' derisive laughter, a silk dress of Anna's torn and ruined the first day she had worn it outside the house. But Ellen's mistaken vision of Joseph and Martha praying together in the field was in some way a denial of such a pattern. When she next weaves and watches two members of her family working in the field, the old apparel suggesting sadness and loss has not changed, but the vision Buckler allows her this time is no denial. It emerges from a hazy consideration of death, as Ellen remembers her long-lost sailor, and grows to contain the futility of David's and Joseph's co-operation: "She looked at them . . . lifting the heavy rocks onto the wagon. That was the first field Richard cleared . . . But with the years of ploughing, rocks showed up again. There were always more rocks beneath" (p. 155).

Father and son work together without speaking, seemingly safe in the surrounding silence, but no stranger is necessary to break "the quiet contact between them"; the initial betrayal plainly comes from within the "perimeter." David's frustration at his task does not stem, as his father suspects, from a physical weariness but from his feelings of being trapped forever in an inarticulate and unimaginative world: "Just because I'm studying languages . . . they think it has something to do with weakness . . . You had to cripple every damn thought you had, every damn thing you did, so they wouldn't look at you funny" (pp. 155, 163). Yet he does not come to terms with his own contribution to this sense of isolation; he is "embarrassed" whenever his father attempts, albeit unconsciously, to reveal "in word or act" the depth of his response to being alive and well on his own land. Buckler explains that Joseph's ". . . feelings weren't word-shaped, like David's. There was no page in his mind or heart where their tracery was legible to himself. But they made a tune in him just the same" (p. 156). David, concerned with the inviolability of his own secrets, lacks insight into this music of pride and faith in what can be seen and touched; Joseph's "tune," meagre as it is beside David's potential orchestration of life, sustains him on this dull day when "Last fall's aftergrass lay withered and matted on the ground."

The traitor *within* the "perimeter" is David as he hurls cruel words at his father's tacit acceptance of things as they are and seem

to be ("Someone of my own name will always live in my house"—p. 157). Something sacred, however tenuous it has always been, has been destroyed when David tells his father, "We exhaust ourselves . . . If you could ever decide anything in advance . . . Anybody with intelligence could see that . . .":

He felt struck, sick, Not by David's anger, but by the words he'd used. He'd known that David possessed words like that; but he'd thought they were Sunday things, like the gold watch fob of his own that lay in the drawer. He thought now: They really belong to him. He's using them against me . . . This place is no kin to him at all, the way it is to me. (p. 165)

The essentially solipsistic and destructive nature of David's talents is revealed here as never before. Joseph, for all his limitations, sees into his son's heart of darkness as David does not see into his father's peaceful inner world.

If David feels a prisoner in his home environment (and his vitriolic outburst against his father indicates that he is), Buckler immediately reveals how David is very much a prisoner of the alternative that he considers will set him free. This alternative has its matrix, as usual, in the use of language—this time that of the city people who pick him up when he runs from the farm intending never to return. David hopelessly romanticizes the exchange of words between the city husband and wife; he takes their conversation at face value without considering its probable overtones or, more important, the possible communicative failure of carefully-modulated, carefully-controlled speech (if not at this particular time in the car, then elsewhere). But, as he did with the words of the play, David painfully recognizes the "no-man's-land" between the "musical languor" of these words and the crippling silence. It is in this territory that Buckler insists David must live out the rest of his life, a prisoner of the valley and of his questionable vision of escape—silence on the one side, deceptive words on the other. He cannot go, in this case, to the city, but neither can he return, in spirit, to the valley that he left only minutes before: "He looked toward home . . . He felt as if he must leap somewhere out of the now, but everywhere it was now . . . He sobbed because he could neither leave nor stay. He sobbed because he was neither one thing nor the other" (pp. 170, 171).

It is significant that the final memory David has before the "no-man's-land" fuses with the familiar landscape of the farm is that of

his failure as a child to complete a perfect page of writing. It is even more significant that Ellen now gives him a locket containing a photograph of her lost sailor; though David sees his own face in the photograph and senses the "mocking" of what has happened to him, the reader associates, as in Buckler's intention with the locket, the failure of words with unexplainable death ("like 'young'"). Soon after, when David next has to serve as an "interpreter" between the languages of outside and inside the valley, he is inadequate; when Anna and Toby come from the city and interrupt the proposed trip to the top of the mountain to cut down the keel-piece, David cannot even speak either one language or the other.

It is in this "no-man's-land" that David is described by Buckler, for the first time in the novel, as being capable of making "a story out of fact." That it is not a talent of promise is suggested by the setting and atmosphere that surround its introduction. In the Canaan barn to slaughter a pig with his father, brother and two helping neighbours, David feels a compulsion to fill "the lull between the preparation and the shot"—the gaping silence—with clever anecdotes; but it is a creative task replete with anxiety and arising from a "... tension that only sparked his ability to reshape and transcend the others' clumsy obscenities" (p. 185). It is ironic that with these phrases of ribaldry, which are so false to him and do not matter, David is so glib and successful. However, the same concern with his own condition that prevented him from hearing his father's inner music in the field prevents him, at first, from listening to the silent "tune" of his brother. Chris is sympathetic to David's state of mind, though he cannot possibly understand it ("Dave don't like to see anything killed"). But David's harmful words burst forth again: "Shut your damn . . ." (p. 189). This time Buckler has death immediately intervene as the pig is shot and there is no lessening of the words' impact through a change of scene or character. In the face of death David is reduced, as never before, to an incoherent babbling in response to Chris's innocent question, "'What's the matter with you?': 'What's the matter . . . ? What's the matter . . . ?' He hadn't meant to speak at all. His anger spilled the words out—though it couldn't supply any that made sense. He could only parrot the words just spoken" (p. 190). His burial in the subsequent silence is so deep that he wants to annihilate anything that breaks it: "He wished he could get hold of Chris's *voice* somehow. He'd tear it to pieces" (p. 190). In fact, Chris's inner "tune" becomes audible "with that odd perceptiveness

you'd never suspected in him"; but David, now hearing this music, is still unable to prevent his "fall" from the barn rafter.

When Ellen hears of the accident she puts her hand to her mouth "as if it were her breath that was threatened" (p. 193). This particular response of the one creative person to the silencing of the other must affect the reader's consideration of the future voice of David, even though he soon regains consciousness; the symbolic overtones of Ellen's gesture cannot be avoided nor the subsequent fact that it is David's mouth which is permanently scarred. Now there is a finality about David's predicament and impotency that was only hinted at previously: "This thing . . . must go forever unresolved" (p. 194). It is precisely at this point in the novel that Buckler has David pick up a pencil and try to write "a story out of fact." However, David's fiction, crafted to breach the silence between him and Chris, is absolutely powerless before the fact of Chris's absence.

David finds the right words "to possess" what is wrong between him and Chris, and Buckler grants David and his talent "the cleansing cathartic of the first accurate line": "His brother's face looked struck" (p. 196). But he grants David no more than this because Chris has to leave the farm to marry Charlotte, who is with child, and the pregnant possibilities of David's art are aborted by the interruption of this other possible birth. The violent twisting by Buckler of the art-catharsis image into the life-abortion image of Charlotte's eventual miscarriage predicts the future of David's creativity. Meanwhile, David discovers he is ". . . desperately glad that he *hadn't* thrown away his only equalizing weapon" before the fact of Chris's absence; this "weapon" is not, it turns out, his fiction but rather the destructive power and pain of his silence:

He took the scribbler from under the pillow and reread the lines he'd written. They had the same stupid fixity as the lines of cracked plaster in the ceiling. There was nothing in them, to come alive as often as they were seen. They were as empty as his name and address scribbled across the white spaces of the catalogue cover in a moment of boredom.

He took his pencil and blackened them out completely, obliterating even the loops of the letters.

And then, like the gradual stealth of a train's rumble . . . he felt the pain returning. (p. 199)

There can be no mistake: the artist in the valley is as helpless and as doomed as his mother when she is lost in the "fascination of

speechlessness" brought on by her final jealousy of Bess. The "equalizing weapon" of her son is her instrument too. She cannot speak to Joseph, say anything, and in the power of *her* silence, like David, she is taken over by pain. The artist is also as helpless and as doomed as his father who has to "act according to the words" he has hurled against Martha and who, as his son once did, runs away. But Joseph will not find a "no-man's-land" of refuge on top of the mountain; only the final silence awaits him there, as it does David when, later, he seems ready to "act according to the words" of his art. As "all the deafness in the world" closes in on Martha beside Joseph's body on the mountain top, David has "a feeling as if he and his grandmother were the only things animate in the whole world" (p. 223). They still are the two creative beings in the valley below, but Buckler's compelling portrait of silence swallowing *all* words is incomplete until David finally joins his father and mother above.

Five years have passed since the death of Joseph and subsequent death of Martha when Part Six of the novel (entitled "The Train") opens with Ellen working on a rug. Buckler's words describing her creative efforts must remind the reader how David's imaginative insight and his craft failed him half a decade previously: "More than ever, lately, her hooking had become a kind of visiting. Memory could bring back the image of others, *but not the tune of them*" (p. 224, italics mine). Ellen's thoughts, stemming from her craft, are of death and isolation; she thinks of Joseph and Martha gone, and she considers the silence of the living. Chris wrote letters home when he was in England during the war, "and the short stubby sentences inside were helpless to communicate anything"; when Chris returned, neither he nor David could find the necessary words to heal the gap between them. Ellen's vision of David in the field, lost in a space of love and hate, originates in her discovery for the rug of his first pair of long pants; he had bought the pants with money he won for writing an essay. Where is the writer now?

He is in the field locked into a loneliness that is "absolute" and possessed of a sensibility that is "self-sufficient" but unproductive. The once-"shining population" in his mind has become "... writhed in a cluster, like the clump of worms you turn out of a can when the day's fishing is over" (p. 227); his head pain, the result of his fall from the rafter into the swallowing silence, permeates all thought and any movement, literal or imaginative, beyond the "perimeter" this

side of death that David has constructed for himself. The gap between himself and art is emphasized: "Or one night, reading . . . He'd slip away, rushingly, transcendently, into the person described or the place . . . and then settle back again into his chair and this room, crushed almost physically" (p. 231). The gap between himself and his own art is examined more closely as he tries to untangle the "cluster".

There would be an awful challenge about each of these things to name it. An accusing . . . As if in having neglected to perceive *everything* exactly he had been guilty of making the object, as well as himself, incomplete.

Sometimes then he would get out the scribbler. He might put down, 'The trickle of water corkscrewed its way down the ditch,' or 'He looked as if he had taken his good face for everyday' . . .

If that seemed perfectly right, conviction would flood him: If he wanted to, he could do as much for everything in the world. Yet with it there was dismay at his neglect of all the things gone by. There was the thought of all the things he'd never see, to know exactly. There'd be such a terror of failing in even one particular, that he couldn't bear to tempt performance further.

. . . He'd feel a tension nearer than anything he'd ever known to the limit of what can be borne without madness. He'd have to get up and dissipate it, sickly, guiltily, in movement.

Yet even *these* things left no impression that was permanent. (p. 233)

The "tension" which marks the failure here may later give way to a kind of blind joy on top of the mountain, but that joy gives way to Buckler's greatest mark of the failure to communicate in the valley—death.

When Buckler prepares the reader for the impending visit of Anna and Toby, and for the outburst of creative activity by David because of this visit, he emphasizes David's relationship with fiction and the irreversible condition of his life. The "lyric feeling" aroused in David by one of Forster's novels is a response to "*the shadow of thought and feelings which actions cast*" (p. 244, italics mine), and he finds this novel, as well as other books "more rapturously adventurous than any odyssey of action." Employing a principally artistic term, Buckler connects this response to art to David's essential impotence and to the last day of his life: 'The *leitmotiv* of the headache had become constant . . . But a limiting illness, if chronic, brings its

own anaesthesia; simply because *the single day's freedom from which it would be enough to invalidate utterly the dull culminative lustre of resignation never comes*" (p. 245, italics mine).

Thus the first few days of Anna's and Toby's visit are only superficially days of "freedom" for David; it is true that the three of them seem to relax together, but always beneath their laughter and companionship are Buckler's overriding images of isolation and death. When Buckler writes that conversation between the three is easy because they have been drinking—"the smooth way it is when no one seems to notice if the answer fits the question only approximately"—he is suggesting the essential hollowness of such an exchange of words, not only because of the alcoholic haze but because, in his creative efforts, David has never been able to accept the approximation of anything. When they gather together at the organ and David seems to be able to deny the "silence," these happy moments of song are suspect because "The pain in his head was like a far-off *tune* hummed by someone else" (p. 241, italics mine). Above all, what is really being avoided by the three is the fact that Toby is only on leave from the war. The war isolates Toby as an individual sailor who has seen others die; it isolates Anna and Toby as a husband and wife fearing loss; and it isolates David who is physically unable to participate and so is different from Toby (the war heightens his already self-conscious sense of exile which Toby cannot appreciate). Everything is fine as long as there is no attempt to communicate what is most obvious. In the good moments "None of the awkwardness of having to fit speech together or to match each other's moods was there at all"; in the bad moments "The obligation to talk would make an awkwardness between them" (p. 255).

Some familiar images are present as well. Walking through an orchard, the three companions come across an abandoned house with its wallpaper of roses still intact; not only is Martha's "pattern" of roses on the bedroom wall recalled but also Joseph's conviction that someone of his name would always live in the Canaan house. The reader knows that the bedroom of roses has produced no grandchildren, and senses that the Canaan house will itself be abandoned. This lack of creativity is underlined by the discovery of a piece of old clothing—"the lace insert from a shirtwaist front"—which will never be part of a grandmother's rug. David tries to raise the subject of Effie with Toby, but Effie and Toby are linked to the death of the partridge that the two men shoot before any conversation can take

place, as is David himself linked to the bird in the closing lines of the novel.

After this orchard imagery comes David's false vision of "colour" in his life, as opposed to previous "black and white," and his only "accomplished expression" as a writer. David's short story has its matrix in isolation and death, it is about isolation and death, and Buckler immediately follows it with Anna's accurate vision of Toby dead with the seas in his mouth. He follows it, too, with David's overwhelming sense of the falseness and futility of his life, an almost nihilistic view of his condition before he walks up the mountain to his final and illusive moments of self and creativity.

David's story is an attempt by him to have art combat and contain the isolation and death that have plagued his life; he writes about his friendship with Tony-Toby from a dual perspective so as to overcome the finality of things dying "like 'young.'" The story is a metaphor for so much else:

Then the great flurry of how it was with *everything* blizzarded inside his head, the things that *always* came to him after the first line. How you could love the land's face and the day's face, but how they never loved you back; the sun would come out brighter than usual the day your father died, and the wind would cut, as blind and relentless as ever, the night your brother was lost in the woods . . . How a man could be trapped by his own nature . . . How, though you cut open his flesh you still couldn't penetrate the skin of separateness each man walked around in . . . How this place had aged, with change . . . How the knitted warmth between its people had ravelled, until each was almost as alone in his own distraction now as the city people were . . . (p. 261)

The "he" in the story is Tony-Toby, but it is also a David looked at by himself-as-artist: "I suppose I meant that he was dead, but that somehow I'd save his part of the pain and the laughing in the world from him always . . . where it could never be lost . . . You knew it was the same way with him now that it was with you that other day . . . And in a minute like that when it's clear how another can have *for* you the things you might have had for yourself, the meaning of everything else is clear too" (p. 263). In this at-last visible ground of the artist's possible victory are the seeds of his defeat: "He felt complex, manifold, *furnished*. It was just the opposite to what he felt when others were there" (p. 262); and when the others return any

connection between art and life is immediately cut off. Toby asks David, in fun, if he is writing his will; in Buckler's unswerving consideration of things, the story can be seen as David's will—words that are meant to take care of what has been left behind. Yet these words are consigned, in shame, to the fire, and David's wishes for his estate are null and void. Later, when he goes over the story in his mind, the "validity" that he feels is lost in the greater validity of the surrounding silence.

David's journey to the top of the mountain is preceded by Anna's and Toby's walk there, where the valley is "... like the intactile landscape of a dream" (p. 269), and where Anna, like others before her, discovers death; like Joseph and Martha, Toby smiles at her with "all the deafness in the world" as she is claimed by the "quick-flaking silence . . . and the forsakenness" that once claimed her mother. When Toby is recalled from leave, never to return, David's failure to break the silence is presented by Buckler in no uncertain terms:

This was the toppling moment of clarity which comes once to everyone, when he sees the face of his whole life in every detail. He saw then that the unquestioned premise all his calculations had been built on was false. *He realized for the first time that his feet must go on in their present path, because all the crossroad junctions had been left irretrievably far behind . . . You could build a wall about yourself, for safety's sake . . . After a while you could beat against the wall all you liked, but it was indestructible . . . My own life brimmed and emptied so soon, and I could never fill it again [David thought] . . . He was outside . . . And, later, the book he'd be reading. The damned, airless, tricking book.* (pp. 274-275, 276, 277, italics mine)

The last view the reader is given of David, before he walks on the mountain to his vision of *the* "book," is of him standing intractable and alone as his father had stood when he used to cut ice in blizzards after other men had given up. Such a view presages David's death in a blizzard of snow and should remind the reader that, despite *his* talents, Joseph could not extricate himself from his fate.

Buckler's description of David as he sets out on his seeming odyssey of action up the mountain road is hardly auspicious: David may not be defeated, nor in despair, nor apathetic; however, he is "one great white naked eye of self-consciousness, with only its own looking to look at" (p. 281), and this eye does not respond to the

“disorder of ordinary experience”⁶ around it. David moves “automatically” and is momentarily caught by some barbed wire on a fence that is a perimeter of his property. “And then . . . as he looked at the frozen landscape, it was as if the outline of the frozen landscape *became his consciousness*” (p. 281): when the reader eventually sees the outline of David’s dead body in the snow, his *unconsciousness wedded to the landscape*, it can be understood that from the beginning of the “Epilogue” David’s fate is certain.

As far as any creative vision on the mountain is concerned, Buckler warns the reader about its efficacy for David when David, “a dizziness . . . in his head,” meets Steve, in whom “Health was . . . like a cadence” (p. 282). As always, David believes that he can find the words that express the thoughts of another; yet, as before, the inner “tune” of this other person goes unnoticed. In contrast, despite his limitations, Steve has little trouble providing David with an “. . . outline of identity” in his mind and does so through concise memories of people and events; his awkward but accurate perception of David as being “Not strong” is linked to the awkward but so significant death-term “like ‘young.’” When David leaves Steve, things seem to be “refocused” for him and his mind has “a new stillness,” but his breaking of the silence with the statement (spoken aloud) “‘It’s perfect here’” (p. 286) rests on the fact that he is “absolutely alone” and on the warped action of his heart:

The beating of his heart brought a kind of lightness to his body now. The cold air and the rush of his blood thinned the ache and the emptiness, distributed it more tolerably throughout all his flesh. *A brightness played over his thoughts like the quickening of fever . . .* He moved on. The brook crossed the road higher up. He lay flat and drank . . . He didn’t remark his face in the brook; or how, when his lips touched the water, *its image wobbled and disintegrated*. When he rose, the blackness swam in his head again. (pp. 286, 288, italics mine)

Buckler also leaves no doubt that it is his absolute isolation that starts David off and sustains him on his subsequent creative consideration of valley life: “He thought of the fields. Unseen, they no longer seemed bare. He thought of the people in the valley. Now they were out of sight, his own face moved kindredly among them . . . The safe wall of spruces was protectedly between him and the valley”

⁶Kertzer, p. 84.

(p. 289). Before David is lost among all the “accusing” images against which he will finally defend himself by insisting that he will write a book, Buckler indicates that David’s creative consideration of things will not be an artistic *re-creation*. The first part of David’s creative experience on the mountain is that of beginning again, of being completely “translated to other moments” without the interference of objective thought necessary to write a book: “It is something that deliberate memory (*with the changed perspective of the years between changing the very object it lights*) cannot achieve at all” (p. 289, italics mine). It represents, in fact, a denial of the perspective of art, a denial of metaphor or “the abstracting power of symbol,” because “It is not a returning: you are there for the first time, immediately” (p. 289).

When these moments of beginning again have vanished, David seeks another type of translation for his mind’s “shining population” that has risen up in rebellion with a “teeming insatiable hunger to be seen” (p. 291), demanding that it finally be led to victory over the silence. But Buckler reminds the reader that the creative energy spawning these “infinite voices” flows from a source long ago depleted, as light emanates from a star long after the star has disappeared: “And David’s legs began to move faster. *Without direction from his mind*. They moved now like the limbs of one who has run until he can run no longer, yet runs on *because the voice of his frightened child is calling*” (p. 292, italics mine). All the voices are the voice of this frightened child calling out to the silent faces of his father, mother, brother, sister, Effie, and even Bess who, it is revealed, committed suicide because she was ostracized by silence.

It is significant that David’s inner voice falters and dies over a single word as he considers his father cutting down the keel-piece: “And exactly what was his hand . . . And ‘hand’ is a word, and what is a word? . . . And ‘n’ is a letter in a word, shaped exactly that way, and sounded exactly by that movement of the tongue, and in exactly how many other words?” (p. 296). The “shining population” seems doomed, like the rock of Sisyphus, to have its implications pushed into infinity: “And behind the tiniest delta in the tiniest line in my father’s cheek, and behind the smallest of the smallest arcs of movement of his arms, were implicit exactly all the thoughts that led him here . . . All the *thoughts* there were, at every time! . . . He heard the crushing screaming challenge of the infinite permutations of the possible . . . the billion raised to the billionth power . . .” (pp. 296, 297).

Then Buckler grants David the translation of death: when David says, "I will tell it," Buckler says, "Sleep is the answer" (p. 298).

David insists that all he has to do is discover the "single core of meaning" behind all the voices; but when he denies the impossibility of writing his book—"he would live a hundred years"—and has a vision of it completed, the reader is told this vision is "... the last load. There [is] nothing left on the road to go back for now" (p. 299). Meanwhile, below, Ellen does complete her rug (begun in the "Prologue") with a piece of cloak that David wore in the school play, thus linking the first and last creative failures of his life. The final concentric circle of the rug is white, signifying David's burial in the snow.

Warren Tallman has written: "The emptiness, the silence, and the snow into which David sinks down at the end of the novel figure forth the constant nothingness against which his bright intensities had beat, thinking it the high shores of the actual world. His life would be pathetic if it were not heroic."⁷ Such emptiness and silence have been the "high shores," the "perimeter" of life in *The Mountain and the Valley*, but Tallman's brave claim for David cannot stand: David's "bright intensities" have been viewed ironically by Buckler; his struggle to find words with which to break the silence has been self-deceptive and futile from the beginning. In inevitable defeat, the protagonist who does not become an artist deserves our pity, not an heroic appellation.

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⁷Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," in *Ernest Buckler*, ed. Gregory Cook (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, Ryerson, 1972), p. 62.