

Language Private and Public: A Study of Wiseman's Crackpot

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Chapter one of Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* begins with an almost biblical-sounding genealogy that points to the central problem of the novel: "Out of Shem Berl and Golda came Rahel. Out of Malka and Benjamin came Danile. Out of Danile and Rahel came Hoda. Out of Hoda, Pipick came, Pipick born in secrecy and mystery and terror, for what did Hoda know?"¹ In this way, Wiseman warns us that Hoda is not part of the normal social order of things. Each of the births preceding Pipick's is the result of what seems to be a traditional mating of husband and wife; the biblical overtones suggest this traditional quality. But Hoda stands alone. She has no husband. And the product of her womb is associated with her ignorance. The implication seems to be that her ignorance goes hand in hand with her isolation from the conventions of the society in which she lives. This is, in essence, the focal point of the novel. For in the early stages of her life, Hoda is not provided with the necessary knowledge, and therefore language, to live a moral life. Ignorant of the conventions of the old society and of the modern world, she is forced to define a personal morality that is based on what she does know—her individual needs and the demands of the environment in which she grows up. And this personal morality is reflected in a very subjective use of words; for lacking public definitions, she must perforce develop her own verbal system.

In *The Survival of English*, Ian Robinson provides a useful discussion on language-learning that can help us to understand how Wiseman is using this theme in her novel. As Robinson, citing D. H. Lawrence and R. G. Collingwood, points out, a child first enters the world of language when he feels an awareness of his own separateness from the mother and asserts his ego through his screams. "This voluntary assertion of conscious individuality is itself the beginning of the child's recreation of a world he shares with others."² In asserting himself self-

¹Adele Wiseman, *Crackpot* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 7.

²Ian Robinson, *The Survival of English* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 8.

consciously with the sound, the young human being is acknowledging his own identity and, at the same time, sharing that understanding with his society. As Collingwood says,

The discovery of myself as a person is the discovery that I can speak, and am thus a *persona* or speaker; in speaking, I am both speaker and hearer; and since the discovery of myself as a person is also the discovery of other persons around me, it is the discovery of speakers and hearers other than myself.³

From this point on, the child learns, by coming to share his society's language, to share his society's conventions, including its moral codes. At the most basic level, even learning the use of a word like *mother* indicates the acceptance of the role played by that person in a particular society. To quote Robinson again,

Mothers cannot be the same in matriarchal and patriarchal societies; the corresponding words for mother express the differences to native speakers. The child begins the path towards naturally seeing his mother in one of the particular ways of the language he speaks as soon as he begins to recognize her with the word. This is not an alternative to knowing his individual mother, but part of it. (p. 9)

What this points to is that one's understanding of various concepts and one's view of life in general are "language dependent." And since a language is a system of conventional sounds—sounds to which a whole community has agreed to give the same meanings—it embodies the various attitudes and moral positions of its community. It follows that in learning a language one, in effect, comes to learn the morality of his society and, also, that one's particular uses of a language indicate where one stands with reference to the established moral norm.

It is this process of verbal-moral development that Wiseman is concerned with in *Crackpot*. The novel goes beyond the traditional maturation theme and actually sets out to analyze the relationship between the self and society in terms of the language-learning (and, therefore, the morality-learning) process. As we shall see, the problem is not a simple one, for Hoda must overcome not just her personal innocence and subjectivity but also the subjectivity of many others who, because they have not completely succeeded in overcoming their own ego-centered views, cannot provide Hoda adequate guidance in teaching her the public verbal-moral system of society.

³Robinson, p. 8.

Hoda should have learned the traditional conventions and gained knowledge of the world first of all from her parents, Rahel and Danile. They do provide her with a solid basis of love and a sense of self-worth. However, they are both limited in their knowledge. In fact, from the beginning, it is clear that they are on the fringes of society and that their marriage is a product of ignorance: they were brought together by their fellow villagers, who were trying to save themselves from the plague by performing a superstitious ritual of marrying the two most unfortunate members of the community in the cemetery at night. Rahel and Danile continue the tradition of ignorance that is represented by this ritual. Rahel, who is the more practical parent and who should therefore give Hoda a knowledge of the world, dies very early in the novel because, like Mrs. Plopler in *The Sacrifice*, she is afraid of modern doctors and she tries to ignore the tumor in her body. Although she is a down-to-earth woman who is critical of her husband's innocence of the world, she is herself incapable of effectively dealing with the world. Her first instinct is to avoid the truth, as she avoids the truth about her tumor. When Danile retells the stories about their past, for instance, she responds negatively, for the stories bring up facts about her deformity or about their misfortunes or about sex, things she would rather change or simply not discuss with her daughter. So it is significant that in the very first scene of the novel we see Rahel taking Hoda to work with her but, at the same time, controlling her and keeping her quiet by stuffing her full of food: "Things can't go in and out of the same little mouth simultaneously," she reasons (p. 7). Rahel does this with the best of intentions, wanting to avoid trouble and to care for and protect her daughter; but in effect, she is discouraging social contact (and therefore the possibility of gaining knowledge) and encouraging self-indulgence. Rahel's situation is, in fact, quite ironic, for although she considers herself to be in touch with "the real world," (p. 24) she fails, as her death indicates, to learn enough about the world in order to survive in it. And, except for a sense of cynicism about life, she leaves her daughter with no real legacy of practical knowledge.

Danile, on the other hand, is extremely optimistic. He is the less practical and more artistic parent. From the very first chapter, we see that it is his function to provide Hoda with a knowledge of her history and her traditions. But the stories he repeats over and over again are not like the stories that Abraham tells in *The Sacrifice*, stories that are shared by the whole Jewish community; rather, they are personal stories. And significantly, they are stories that are associated with blindness

or ignorance. Mention has already been made of the story of Rahel and Danile's marriage. Danile's second story involves Hoda's grandfather, the Job-like Shem Berl, who is tricked into serving an extra five years with the Czar's army because he cannot read Russian (he signs an enlistment form instead of a release form) and who serves another five years after as a substitute for his younger brothers. And a third story, actually the first one told, concerns the emigration of Rahel, Danile, and Hoda to Canada. The crux of the story is that they were afraid they would not be accepted into the new world because of Danile's blindness. So to fool the immigration officers, Danile grew a beard (to look like a scholar), and on the crucial day he carried a book in front of his face. In his blindness, Danile ends up carrying the book upside down, but fortunately, baby Hoda begins to scream and the immigration officers rush them through without noticing Danile's blindness. The optimistic Danile takes this as evidence of Divine Providence, but his assessment of this episode also indicates how Wiseman is using the language theme in these stories:

"But upside down though it was, and held by a blind man, it led us safely into this land. You see how right my father was? The Book is holy; knowledge is a wonderful thing if you know how to use it, even ignorant people, like your mother and myself. Sometimes I sit with the Book in my hand and think how close the Almighty has let me come to wisdom while I must remain so far. And yet, He lets His words come to our aid in His own way." (p. 13)

One is of course led to ask, what does knowledge have to do with it? They trick the immigration officers, not with Danile's knowledge, but with an innocent baby's screams. The word of God is not being used. In fact, Danile's blindness and his holding the book upside down symbolize his ignorance and his inability to use the word of God in this situation. What Danile has is not knowledge but a blind faith in the positive forces of life. This blind faith is a product of his "extraordinary sweetness" of character, (p. 14) and it will ultimately be rewarded. However, his self-oriented stories are actually a legacy of ignorance which is responsible for Hoda's verbal-moral isolation, because the stories, and Danile's and Rahel's attitudes in general, foster a self-oriented rather than a community-oriented view of life.

One of the first indications of this limited moral perception occurs in chapter two when we find out about one of Hoda's favorite games:

There are things you can do and things you shouldn't do and things you mustn't get caught doing. If you got caught they were likely to become things you absolutely shouldn't do. A lot of things you liked got spoiled that way. Not that Hoda wanted to keep secrets from her parents. She didn't, as a matter of fact, because that weighed on her stomach and made her feel bad. She usually ended up by half-confessing what she was afraid her parents might not approve, and she was usually right, they didn't. But occasionally she was relieved when it turned out they didn't object to a game she really liked, that some of the kids thought was bad, like *Doctors and Nurses*.

"What were you doing in the shed all that time?" Rahel asked over supper.

"We were playing a game," said Hoda. "It's called *Doctors and Nurses*. I like it."

"*Doctors and Nurses*?" Danile was delighted. "You want to be a doctor or a nurse when you grow up?"

"Or a patient," said Hoda.

Rahel shuddered, "Heaven forbid!" Children are funny. "You eat up your supper and drink your milk and you'll never have to be a patient, please God."

Parents are funny. Hoda like being a patient. She liked taking her clothes off and letting the other children examine her. She liked being touched, she enjoyed fumbling in the shed. "Sometimes I'm a doctor," she said obligingly.

"To be a doctor is a great honour," said Danile, "and a great responsibility. You must study, study, study. You must spend your whole life helping people." (pp. 26-27)

This passage illustrates a child's moral thinking. Hoda does what she does, not because it is right or wrong, but because she likes it; it gives her pleasure. She is beginning to get input from the world outside of herself—the children and, most important to her, her parents—on the relative correctness of her actions. But it is interesting that she perceives, not just right and wrong, but also "things you mustn't get caught doing." Her parents' role, of course, should be to catch her at the appropriate times and teach her the relationship between the pleasurable and the good. But as this scene indicates, her parents' perceptions (and therefore their ability to catch her and give her moral instruction) are limited by their personal preoccupations. Rahel is sick and hopes her daughter will not be a patient. Danile has dreams and finds the prospect of her becoming a doctor a solution to their poverty and suffering. Both are therefore verbally (and morally) insensitive, and they fail to catch Hoda when she is just beginning to launch into her long sexual career.

Lacking adequate moral guidance from her parents, Hoda is left

to develop a personal verbal-moral system that is based on her individual needs and on her family's stories. But she soon finds herself in conflict with the verbal-moral system of those outside of her personal sphere. At school she considers herself to be misjudged and not loved as she is at home. And when she tries to share the story of Shem Berl with her school mates, she discovers for the first time that she and the outside world do not share the same language:

Hoda had discovered that "duty" and "honour of your country" were the things you said that made you feel patriotic and just like everybody else in English. In Yiddish the words that felt right when you talked of wars and soldiers were, "When will they stop killing each other like wild animals and come home and look after their families?" But the English feelings were good here, for all the children shared them and were looking at the warrior's granddaughter respectfully. She forgave them gladly for having laughed at her and called her names so often, and tried to think of something more to tell them.

"What did she say her grandfather was? A stinker?" asked one of the bigger kids at the outer edge of the circle.

"No, he's a tinker," Hoda explained. "He mends broken pots, and he can even make new ones, if . . ."

"Stinker, stinker! Hoda's grandfather's a stinker!" The circle was broken. They were scattering from her in all directions. "Stinker, stinker!" The joke was too good to resist. "Hoda's grandfather's a stinker!" (p. 34)

This is a good illustration of the kind of verbal adjustment discussed by Ian Robinson. Hoda is trying to gain acceptance by using the proper English words (and therefore sharing the English moral position on war). But unfortunately for her, the process does not work as easily in the opposite direction. The children cannot share her personal perceptions. Consequently, they distort her words, and Hoda is left isolated and frustrated.

This tension between Hoda's perceptions and the outside world's perceptions is further increased by Hoda's teacher, Miss Flake, another figure who should provide moral guidance and instruction. But Miss Flake, like Danile and Hoda, is not fully in touch with objective reality; she is a dreamer. Her world revolves around her devotion to royal families. For this reason, she is admired by Hoda, who develops her own fantasy about herself and the Prince of Wales. But Miss Flake's admiration for the aristocracy, particularly for the Czar of Russia, creates confusion for Hoda when the Russian Revolution begins. Miss Flake continues to believe in the Czar, but Danile and his friends and Hoda's

Jewish teacher all support the revolutionary cause, so Hoda finds that she is "no longer at all sure of her own position in the world of Miss Flake's values" (p. 60). Significantly, she resolves her dilemma by reverting to her subject world and by imagining that if Miss Flake came to her home, the source of her personal moral vision, her mother (who is now dead) and her father would enlighten her. And she also considers sharing her personal vision once more with the outside world. But her previous failure at communication has made her cautious:

She hesitated because it was her special knowledge and it set her apart from them inside, where she could get away from them all whenever they were mean. Sometimes she thought, *if they knew they'd never be mean again*; but she wasn't always so sure, and something inside her didn't want to use it on them as a weapon, but rather, wanted someday maybe to give it to them as a gift, when she didn't even have to, and they would always go on linking each other after that, forever.

Rich Uncle Nathan and his position on the grain exchange were something different. He belonged to the world of daily profit and loss that they all shared. So she could boast about him and show off a little about what he might give her and not even care what they said. They didn't have to believe her, she had the whole grain exchange on her side. (pp. 60-61)

Once more, Hoda's dilemma is defined in terms of the contrast between her private knowledge (and therefore language) and a shared, public knowledge. But what we begin to see is that the teachers and other persons associated with public knowledge in her life do not provide the proper instruction that will teach Hoda to become a public, moral person. Uncle Nathan is a crass materialist, and he is also, like Miss Flake and many others in Hoda's life, a dreamer. He dreams of being the great philanthropist of his community, not because he loves his fellow man (if anything, he is a misanthrop), but because great public generosity would bring great public honor to him. He is the ultimate egotist of the novel. Everything he does is self-directed, and even though he is not by any means admired by Hoda, his egotism points to the central problem in Hoda's moral development.

Another important negative adult influence is Yankl the butcher. In fact, it is he who actually initiates Hoda into a form of prostitution by coaxing her, with a payment of bones and scraps of meat, to masturbate him behind the counter in his shop. And what is particularly important about the way he does this is that he pretends that nothing

is going on. Hoda seems to accept this situation, which most of society would consider a perversion of sex and of reality, and she judges it according to the only moral criterion she knows: “. . . Yankl liked it so it must be all right” (p. 76). Through his selfishness, Yankl reinforces this kind of thinking and, in fact, complicates Hoda's moral ignorance. For not only does he introduce her to sexual activity, but by pretending to be detached (as if he were in a fantasy world), Yankl tries to deny the need for knowledge and responsibility. In fact, when Hoda later offers to go sexually all the way with Yankl, he is shocked by her knowledge about such matters and gives her a lecture on immorality. And she has to pretend to be ignorant before he will allow her to earn her scraps of meat again. In this way, he in effect trains her to ignore the real meaning of words:

He was so upset it was a little while before she could even soothe him into letting her do what he had trained her to do for her meat scraps. Without looking at her he made her say, first, that she hadn't really meant it, and that she didn't even really know what she was talking about. She had just been repeating what she heard some older kids saying. Only then, while she was parroting his words, did Hoda find that his dream was beginning to work for him again. (p. 117)

Thus, Yankl helps to reinforce in Hoda's mind the notion that sexual activity, particularly the sexual use of others, is to be judged according to the dictates of self-interest and the pleasure principle (in actuality, it is not to be really judged at all, for words lose their meaning and Hoda simply parrots them).

Indeed, at the same time as she becomes involved with Yankl, Hoda also begins to make herself sexually available to some of the boys at school. And in defending herself against those that accuse her of doing a bad thing, she reasons that it is good because it makes her “feel so good.” As she has no desire to cultivate bad feelings: “why should she squeeze all her good feelings down and be left with only mean feelings instead?” (p. 77) Again, we see that Hoda's morality is based on the pleasure principle, but what is also revealed here is that Hoda is more than a mindless hedonist. Like her father, she is a positive thinker and a dreamer. She believes in “the boundless goodwill that was ready to flow in the universe;” and she sees herself “as a direct tap to the source [of this goodwill], just waiting to be turned on” (p. 89). This explains why she tries to find love in all of her early sexual encounters. At times she believes that even Yankl “liked her a lot” (p.

76). She is pleased that the boys do not care about her obesity "when they were liking her," (p. 76) as she puts it, distorting the work *like* into a euphemism for sex. In fact, when one of these boys is fondling her, she fantasizes that he is the Prince of Wales finally come to choose her as his princess. And when the husband of one of the ladies she cleans house for later gives her some money after having poked her from behind, Hoda reasons that "he really must have fallen passionately in love with her at first sight, if he couldn't resist coming at her that way" (p. 83). In these examples, Hoda's naive conception of the words *like* and *love* shows that she is trying to impose a very subjective vision on reality (as Yankl does). As a result, she forces herself not to face evil. And whenever she has a bad thought, she repeats the words " 'No, I didn't mean it,' over and over again, to chase away the bad thought and make it all right." Instead, she cultivates a positive dream that is associated with her father: "She just wanted everyone to be nice to everyone else and the lovetime to hurry up, and people to come and buy Daddy's baskets . . . Of course, when the really good time came she would be thin and beautiful like everyone else, and have plenty to eat anyway. If only people would hurry up and begin to buy Daddy's baskets" (p. 80).

Hoda has been taught by her father that knowledge is the solution to man's problems and the key to the realization of one's dreams. But as we have seen, the knowledge that he has given her is private, self-oriented, and allied to ignorance and blindness. So when Hoda tries a second time to share one of her stories (the one about her parents' marriage) at school, she once again finds her private world in conflict with the outer world. As in the first instance, Hoda believes that the story will be understood and appreciated by others in exactly the same way as she understands and appreciates it; the result will be communion and love. This is Hoda's personal dream, but as before, it remains unachieved because Hoda finds herself at verbal cross purposes with her audience, and in particular with her new teacher, Miss Boltholmsup. Miss Boltholmsup's very name, in fact, represents the verbal-moral problem. It is a very odd name that easily lends itself to distortions and jokes. The children refer to her as Miss "Bottoms-up" or "Bottomsuck." But significantly, the teacher seems to be highly oblivious to the comic potential of her last name. In fact, she begins the story-telling assignment by telling a personal story of her own; and when she ends the story with a question, "Who knows where the last of the Boltholmsups will end up?" (p. 92) she is completely insensitive to her pun and is quite

mystified by the children's laughter.

Miss Boltholmsup's verbal narrow-mindedness reflects her inability to see things in more than one way or to understand the thinking of others, a basic skill for a teacher. And so in the scene that ensues, Hoda tells her story, which she sees as something "beautiful and holy," (p. 100) with the intention of sharing the essence of herself with others so as to win their love; but Miss Boltholmsup, feeling insecure and threatened, perceives none of this. As her name suggests, she turns Hoda's intentions on their end, and she sees only evil and perversion in what is just a child's innocent version of a family story. For example, when Hoda describes the marriage scene, Miss Boltholmsup interprets the word *married* in a way that Hoda is quite incapable of even imagining yet:

What did she mean by "married?" What exactly did she mean? Light and heat flooded Miss Boltholmsup's brain simultaneously. Suddenly she knew exactly where Hoda was leading, saw in disgusting detail the whole obscene picture, the wretched couple of cripples copulating in the graveyard while a bearded, black-robed, fierce-eyed rabbi stood over them, uttering God knows what blasphemies and unholy incantations, with the whole, barbaric townful of them avidly looking on. Miss Boltholmsup was positively sick to the stomach with the vividness of it. She had to shut her eyes against the nausea. (p. 97)

It should be Miss Boltholmsup's task to provide Hoda with knowledge, to teach her her public language. Indeed, after she stops Hoda before the story's end, she briefly lectures the class on being "good citizens" and on "fitness." As she puts it, "If you want to fit in with people what you say should fit the occasion and audience" (p. 99). And after school she speaks to Hoda alone about "appropriateness," particularly the inappropriateness of Hoda's short tunic and general appearance. But even though Miss Boltholmsup is trying to teach Hoda public knowledge and language, she fails because she is basically self-centered herself. She is more concerned with "survival," (p. 102) with maintaining a surface order and decorum in her classroom. Consequently, she fails to understand this fat little girl's story, which is really nothing more than an appeal for love and acceptance.

Ironically, then, Miss Boltholmsup's insistence on public "fitness" and "appropriateness" has the effect of shutting Hoda off even more strongly against the outside world. Right after school, when she realizes that her fellow students have not understood her story either, Hoda

that "Nobody was going to get another chance to spoil it. Let them be as dumb as they couldn't help being anyway" (p. 102). Then she playfully allows some of the boys to throw dice for her sexual favors. And lacking any real knowledge of what is truly fitting or appropriate, she reverts to her very personal and very naive moral thinking when Morgan, the winner of the dice game, asks for his agreed upon reward:

Not that Hoda had any intention of letting it go too far with Moran. He was neither a Jew nor, she was pretty sure, a prince. But he was nice to her and Hoda didn't want to go home yet. Morgan spread out the money on the step beside Hoda. "Here," he said hopefully, "it's all yours. A bargain's a bargain."

Hoda wondered if he really meant it. Would he give her all that money? Even the seven cents he'd started with? How did she know he wasn't a prince anyway? The way they'd played for her, all three of them, like in those stories where a whole bunch of knights and princes and dukes and things went out to fight for the fair lady, and the best one won. Wasn't it the same thing, only with them shedding their money instead of their blood? Wouldn't any princess rather have it that way? What good was a bloody prince? And Morgan had won and laid the whole purse at her feet. Wasn't that love? (p. 104)

It is of note that Hoda first thinks about Morgan's heritage (an idea which implies traditions and a moral system). But having little knowledge in this area, she quickly passes over it and thinks instead in terms of her personal fairy tale. As we have seen before, she has not been provided with a definition of *love*. So she defines the word herself in terms of what she knows—her fantasy and money. And since Morgan is willing to play along with her by repeating the, to her, magic words "I love you" several times, she allows him to take her virginity on the stairs of the school.

In a very real way, then Miss Boltholmsup's selfishness and narrow-mindedness are directly responsible for this second important step in Hoda's sexual career (the first being her involvement with Yankl). The very close association between Hoda's deflowering and the school reinforces the heavy irony of her situation. Rather than providing Hoda with knowledge and a public language, the school actually encourages Hoda to retreat into herself and to define the world in her own private way. Her school and her teachers have failed to respond to her in a loving and understanding way. Quite naturally, then, she gradually stops going to school, she relies more on her own feelings, and she becomes a self-teacher: "She would go back [to school] if and when she felt like

it. Right now all she wanted to do was stay away, and she didn't have to explain to anybody either; she just felt like it, that's why. She didn't have to go to school to learn things. She could teach herself, in her own way" (p. 109).

This retreat into self-reliance is reinforced by Hoda's father, and significantly, Wiseman associates his influence not only with blindness but also with language problems. To begin with, Danile does not speak English and is therefore unable to find out what is going on at Hoda's school. As Hoda envisions it, if he were to go to school he would be unable to communicate and would therefore be ridiculed. But Danile does not go to the school. In his good natured innocence, he accepts Hoda's story "that she wasn't learning anything in school this year, because she was so far ahead of class and teacher" (p. 110). So complete and blind is his faith in Hoda that, when she starts bringing her customers home, Danile believes that she has become a teacher and that she is giving private lessons. He even encourages Hoda's "pupils" by yelling out "study, study" from his own room. This is a highly absurd situation, and it is rendered even more heavily ironic by a verbal ambiguity that is initially noticed by Hymie, Hoda's first "pupil":

Afterwards, they sat and talked in the kitchen for awhile, and Hoda gave Hymie some tea, and took a cup in to Daddy too, and Daddy called out, "study, study," encouragingly to Hymie again from his bedroom. It made Hymie a little uncomfortable, because the word for "study" in Hebrew sounds like the word for "pig" in Yiddish, and he thought, *her old man really is cracked*, but didn't say anything, naturally, because of Hoda's temper. (pp. 119-120)

This is the first time the word *cracked* appears in the novel. To Hymie's mind, the word means crazy. He thinks that Hoda is crazy for trying to sell him one of Danile's baskets before they can have sex again. And Danile's yelling from his bedroom marks him as crazy too. In fact, as Hymie leaves, Danile once more yells out "study, study" (which to Hymie's ears sounds like "pig, pig"), and Hymie responds by thinking, "Jeez, what a crackpot!" (p. 120) But madness is not really the central issue in *Crackpot*. As is clear at the end of the novel, Danile comes to see full well what is happening in his house. And yet he pretends to be blind to it, and he transforms the reality of prostitution into the fiction of teaching simply by using the appropriate words. In this way he is split, or cracked.

The same is true of Hoda. She never goes mad in the literal sense. Indeed, when she suffers her most devastating experience (having to

accept her own son as a customer), we are told that “she touched, that night, the outermost boundary of aloneness that can be reached by a human being who is yet denied that privilege of loss of responsibility in suffering, which is the gift of madness” (p. 251). But Hoda is cracked because she tries not to face reality and responsibility. We can see this in the scene with Hymie. Right after he leaves, Hoda wonders what would happen if Danile were to find out. And she answers her own query in a way that shows that she, like her father, can blind herself:

No he wouldn't [find out]. Daddy didn't know about such things. He'd never believe it. She'd kill anyone who told him. The guys wouldn't dare say anything, even though she could tell they thought it was pretty funny the way he kept calling out to them to study and cram. No, he wouldn't find out. Of course he wouldn't. Wouldn't what? What was it she'd just been thinking about? Something that made her feel awful. About daddy? A bad thing. Not about daddy if it was a bad thing. She couldn't remember, suddenly. It had just slipped away. But it would come back. And then maybe she would find it was a mistaken thought, and she would be able to think it into something good. Only she couldn't concentrate. It was gone. She couldn't remember. Let it go. Maybe it wasn't so bad if it went away just like that. Better it should forget itself, whatever it was, and let her begin to feel better. (p. 121)

Put in simple terms, Hoda's “cracked” condition manifests itself in the tension between ignorance and knowledge, and since knowledge should lead to responsibility, between irresponsible behavior and responsible behavior. Particularly relevant here is the relationship between this tension and Hoda's use of language. Hoda's deception of her blind father and his association of “studying” with her prostitution links the notions of ignorance and blindness with verbal imprecision. The ignorant are out of touch with reality and therefore incapable of using public language accurately. Hoda reflects this idea herself. Notwithstanding her developing sexual prowess, she is at first comically ignorant of certain sexual basics. Her notion of conception is totally her own fabrication. It is, in fact, something like the old homunculus theory with the difference that, rather than thinking that a man implants a complete human being in the woman, she believes that each ejaculation provides only some body parts. Her method of birth control, then, is to go “with a lot of guys [because] it was more like scrambling the parts of a whole bunch of jig-saw puzzles” (p. 137). The simile illustrates her ignorance and the metamorphosis of reality through words: she sees not babies but “puzzles.” Similarly, when she does indeed become pregnant, her ig-

norance blinds her once more and she refers to the fetus inside her as a "lump" (associating it with the growth that killed her mother). Her labor pains she calls "a stomach ache," and the child itself is just an "it" even after it is born. Only after she has bitten through the umbilical cord with her teeth and washed herself and her child does she, "daring to put a name to the thing for the first time, a baby," (p. 150) face reality by using the appropriate word.

The birth of Pipick would seem to be a symbolical rebirth for Hoda. It does mark the beginning of a more serious search for knowledge on her part which is represented by her going to the library and informing herself on the true facts about reproduction. But at the same time, and this is what creates the tension that underlies Hoda's "cracked" condition, she regresses into childish subjectivity and yearns once more for her father's stories: "It was curious that she was most like the child she had been once, now that she was most acutely in the grips of her womanhood . . . She wanted stories and still more stories" (p. 152). The central reason for this dilemma is that she denies Pipick's existence. She secretly deposits him at the door of the local orphanage, and she leaves him with an ambiguous note that suggest that the baby is a "prince in disguise" who can "save the Jews" (p. 154). In this way she is not only relinquishing her maternal responsibilities by not keeping him and by not publicly acknowledging her connection to her son, but through her words, she creates a lie which reminds us of her inability to accept his true identity. In fact, the boy grows up with the idea that he is a "prince" with great expectations. And Hoda encourages this falsehood by anonymously sending gifts of money to the orphanage addressed "for the prince."⁴

As in her earlier stages, then, Hoda's use of words continues to reflect her subjectivity and her alienation from reality and from a public language. For instance, at one point she labels her acts of prostitution "charity work" (p. 172); later she dubs herself a "sexual worker," (p. 218) and later still she calls her work "show biz" (P. 275). This is accompanied by a growing irony that underscores her "cracked" nature. For as is the case when Hoda educates herself about sex with books, she is becoming more knowledgeable about the world and more so-

⁴Wiseman, p. 221. Towards the end of the novel, when Hoda has started to face reality, the narrator notes that "she no longer suffered with the old acuteness the disappointment of her expectation" (p. 284). The reference to unattained expectations in this particular context, together with the similarity of Pipick's name to Pip, suggests an allusion to Dickens' *Great Expectations*, which in many ways serves as an ironic backdrop to Hoda's story.

phisticated, a development that is suggested by her verbal witticisms. But significantly, these witticisms are associated with realities that Hoda wishes to change, like the war. In the same way that she denies her son by verbally transforming him into a "prince," she now denies the reality of war by turning it into a joke: "'Bundle for Britain,' she cheered her clients on. 'Fornicate for freedom,' she invited one and all. 'Let my end justify your means,' she counselled. . . . Don't think how I lower your morals; think how I raise your morale'" (p. 270). We are reminded by the narrator that behind this jollity is the very serious desire to change things: "She had always enjoyed fooling around with sayings and slogans; you could camouflage enormous distances with words. In fact, if you fooled around with them long enough, you got so you couldn't believe a thing they said" (pp. 270-271). But just as she cannot ignore her son and must, in fact, have sex with him, she also comes to see that the reality of war cannot be avoided forever. And as Hoda's young customers start to be killed in battle, "the news of their dying cut great gaps in her ring of hope," (p. 271) a hope that she had created through her words.

Thus it is Hoda's experience with public reality that ultimately forces her to face the truth more honestly and to use words more responsibly. This is best illustrated in the final chapter of the novel. At first, Hoda is struggling with the reality of war and she misuses words. In addition to her witticisms on war and sex, one should also note her verbal gaffe when she rejects her first proposal of marriage: "'With me your relationship is going to be strictly platonic!' Hoda threw herself back on the mattress from which she had risen in the ardour of her rage, and flung her legs apart" (p. 273). As the chapter progresses, Hoda is seen to discard some of her dreams, and she even desires "to shift some of the burden of knowledge from her own shoulders" to her son's (p. 284). But she cannot because she is out of touch with him. And, at any rate, she is not ready, for when her father hints that he might know the truth about her life, she is afraid of his words: "How uneasy Daddy's words made her. She was beginning to feel surrounded. Why was it that words never told you exactly what was being said? Why was it that sometimes all of a sudden you didn't want to know exactly what was being said?" (p. 292)

A similar verbal challenge to Hoda's subjective view occurs in the very last pages of the novel. Lazar, a man who literally raises himself from the death of a pogrom, invites her to be reborn into a more public life (paradoxically, her prostitution reflects a very private moral percep-

tion) by proposing marriage. This is obviously very threatening to her, for she eventually becomes involved in a heated argument with him which stems from what the narrator calls "her private ache" (p. 296). And significantly, Lazar elevates her above this isolation in the self by focusing on the definition of a word:

"At first I didn't understand you people, and the names you gave us that I thought were in your foreign language; 'Maw-kee.' But finally I recognized the word; it was a word I knew very well, and I understood too why you called us 'ma-kés', curses, plagues, the cursed ones. Why had we clawed our way free to come and squat in imitation of life among you? You really want to cherish the past Hodaleh? All right. Help me to bring my dead flowers to life from under a field of lye. But they are dead. And I left them. Yes, you were right in what you said before. That's what you can expect from a ma-kéh."

"But that's not what I meant. That's not what I was talking about! That's not what it means. It's not ma-kéh, it's mocky, mocky. It's just a name, a joke. I don't know what it means, maybe to mock, to make mock, to make fun of. It's not a nice expression. I didn't mean it." (p. 297)

This is a very important scene, for in forcing her to recognize the public meaning of a word that she has not taken seriously, Lazar helps Hoda to see that she has defined life only in her own terms. As she says while apologizing, "I didn't know what you meant, honest. I didn't mean anything. I just meant about me, that's all . . ." (p. 297).

This marks the real verbal-moral rebirth of Hoda. Such a rebirth is not possible in her previous relationships: not with Pipick because she tries to deny his existence, nor with her father because both he and she encourage a blindness to the truth. But Lazar knows the truth (he even discusses it with Hoda's father), and he reveals the complete truth about himself to Hoda. In accepting him in marriage, then, Hoda begins to accept things as they really are. She learns to see him not as "mocky" but as "ma-ké": that is, she shifts from a subjective view to an objective, public view which involves accepting "the responsibility of knowing" (p. 298).

In this way, Wiseman brings her protagonist to a higher level of consciousness, a growth that is in keeping with the verbal-moral development discussed by Ian Robinson. It takes her a long time, but Hoda finally starts to become a more complete moral being when she opens her vision beyond herself and accepts her public responsibilities. Up to this final point in the novel, she has truly been "cracked" and

alienated. But when she accepts Lazar and the public meaning of his words, she marries herself to a truth larger than herself, and she begins to seal the crack in her soul.

To recognize this is to disagree with those critics who see in the novel an affirmation of madness. Russell M. Brown, for instance, in comparing *Crackpot* to Wiseman's first novel, says that "in this second book the idea of sacrifice is gone, displaced by the crackup—the breakdown into craziness, which, unlike Abraham's death-dealing madness, can be life-affirming . . ." ⁵ But as the evidence discussed in this paper suggests, Hoda is not crazy; she is in fact "denied that privilege of loss of responsibility in suffering, which is the gift of madness." That is why she is cracked, because she, like her father, who yells "study, study," knows the truth and yet seeks to deny it. And as long as she continues to do so, she does not enjoy "some freedom from the demands of the group," as Mr. Brown suggests. ⁶ Rather, she is trapped in a moral dilemma; and it is this entrapment which alienates her from truth and "cracks" her. It is only when she starts to become more a part of the group by acknowledging its verbal system that she starts to save herself from the suffering of her isolation.

Put in simple terms, Hoda is, like her son, "a self created person" (p. 269). She is a vital spirit born into ignorance and innocence. The problem the novel poses is, how does a person who has not been provided with a public verbal-moral system make moral choices? The answer is that such an individual will of necessity have to begin with the egocentric dictates of the private self, which creates its own language. But when the innocent person like Hoda finds herself having to answer not only to her ego but also to others, such as a child with his own selfish demands, and to society at large, then her very innocence becomes challenged. She can no longer remain comfortably in ignorance. She must, if she is ever to be productive, ultimately accept the knowledge that the world has to offer, and she must participate in the verbal system that society has developed to define and judge that knowledge.

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⁵Russell M. Brown, "Beyond Sacrifice," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*. XVI (1976). p. 159.

⁶Brown, p. 161.