

A Geography of "Snow": Reading Notes

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1. The Trickster's Documentary

CONVENTIONAL READINGS of Frederick Philip Grove's *Over Prairie Trails* (1922) call it *documentary*, describing it as a faithful account of seven journeys the author took, over the course of the changing seasons, between the Manitoba town where he taught school and the house (34 miles distant) where his wife lived.¹ The feel of "documentary" derives from at least two sources: the specific details of number and location (*seven, 34, Manitoba*) and the verbal appeals to reliability (*faithful, husband, teaching school*). As with so many other of Grove's works, however, the text — of "Snow," for example, the fourth sketch in the series of seven — invites the reader at once to accept the narrative as fact and to see through the facade of detail to the inventive games, the fantasy, that the narrative plays.

"Snow" tells of the teacher's massive struggle with blizzard, horses, and obliterated land. "How heroic, how manly, how authoritative," the reader is invited to respond. Robert Kroetsch recognizes the game being played: "old liar," he calls Grove-the-narrator-of-"Snow" (in his poem "F.P. Grove: The Finding," 452) — and, rewriting Grove's story, he gives the last word not to the narrator and his claims of a successful conquest of the elements, but to the waiting wife; her mundane enquiry ("You had a hard trip?") undercuts the illusions of epic, tripping the trickster. In this way Kroetsch enjoys the tall tale that Grove tells, but he also reclaims the ordinary from the outlandish fantasies of the documentary pretender. Why is it, then, that conventional readings are so willing to accept the "fidelity" of the narrative record? How does the text dress tall tale in the trappings of "fact"? What does the success of the illusion have to do with vocabulary, and, more generally, with the conventional language of land? Maybe Grove has shaped his narrative (whether deliberately or not) according to conventional formulae and it's the formulaic representation of empirical space and narrative time that draws the reader into accepting a sense of "documentary" transparency. And maybe Kroetsch, for that

matter, is not altogether neutral in attributing the fantasy to Grove and the ordinariness of reality to Grove's wife, for Kroetsch, too, uses his rhetoric to invite the reader's judgemental agreement. Maybe the geography of presentation calls for a different, a more layered, kind of reading.

Grove's first book to be published in Canada, *Over Prairie Trails* draws on conventions that had been well established by the time it appeared. Among these are the conventions of nature writing (which was as subjective — as deceptively "scientific" — in C.G.D. Roberts, for example, as in Grove), the conventions used to represent a cold northland (which was situated loosely in northern Ontario, *les pays d'en haut* of Quebec, and the western prairies as well as in the Arctic, as in the *Pretty Pierre* stories of Gilbert Parker), the conventions of the journey as an epic test of masculinity (as in the popular fictions of Robert Ballantyne and Ralph Connor, a set of paradigms that Richard Phillips describes as a "geography of adventure"), and the conventions of the "documentary sketch" itself (which tended to accept the objectivity of narrative description as axiomatic). In its entirety, *Over Prairie Trails* describes a kind of arc, from the negotiations that set up the initial arrangements for travel to the last arrival home "in the best of moods and conditions" (OPT 158). Each of the seven travels reiterates this pattern in small, reporting on movement over land, across documentable place, and using similar tropes to narrate the trip: tropes of departure, delay, impediment, surmounting impediment, and arrival, the repetition of which affirms the cumulative reliability of knowledge. Together, however, the sketches enact a kind of downwards and upwards parabola as well, through metaphoric space, and the sequence suggests that it is less the reliability than the arbitrariness of order that the repetition of tropes reveals.

The initial (relatively uneventful) journey, that is, immediately precedes one that hints at danger (fog making the distance seem longer, space troped by time). Then follows a sketch suggesting that danger is readily dealt with, three sketches that refute this interim conclusion by intensifying danger (representing it by means of blizzard, squall, and illness), and a final sketch in which "drift" (the slide in and out of alertness, on and off the trail) interrupts the ostensible security that experience, preparedness, knowledge, and familiarity might have been expected to lay claim to. "Snow" itself appears in the central narrative position; it is this position, as well as the narrative stance it adopts and the acquired resonance of its title image, that makes the artifice of this episode so instructive. Almost all the sketches refer to the fact of snow, using winter to suggest emphatically the state of isolation (or "wilderness") that gives rise to a

language of loss, deviation, and adversity (and that, in consequence, makes the language of accomplishment and resolution seem all the more orderly and reassuring). Closer reading of the text underscores the artifice, reconfirms that the narrative arc *enacts a condition of perception* rather than *records a set of empirical observations*. In a more than superficial sense, the narrator *tells his way* through space and time. At the beginning of the opening sketch, for example, he says to the reader that he will "tell the plain truth," and that it has been a stumble — not "my sagacity" (*OPT* 15) — that has led him to buy Peter, the horse who will save him so often on these pages. But Grove's truth is never "plain." Almost at once he is *across a bridge, between fields*, following a *correction line*, and alongside a *bluff*: the wary reader will listen for the intricate indeterminacies, watch for the artful signs of deliberate misdirection, hear "evidence" as metaphor. Language is the landscape being traversed. And it is the telling, not just the teller, that cannot quite be believed.²

2. Just the Facts, Naturally

"Snow" begins with apparent precision: "The blizzard started on Wednesday morning" (*S* 187, *OPT* 73).³ The appeal to the calendar soon gives way to the subjectivity of memory and perception, but initially this shift seems more like narrative coloration than deliberate rhetorical strategy. It is, of course, both. But by acknowledging how difficult this trip *is known to be*, and how much more difficult — how nearly impossible — it *will be* in a blizzard, the narrator asserts himself (and inferentially *establishes* himself) as knowledgeable rather than naive. Thus the subjectivity initially reconfirms the "factuality" of record. When the plans and preparations are in place, therefore, and the trip subsequently begins, the textual appeals to geometry and science reconfirm what the reader expects to hear: specifics of observation, the ostensibly reliable evidence of categorical system and sensory measurement.

The record of the "first mile" of the trip, for example, is nothing if not Cartesian. This is a landscape of intersecting solids and planes, represented as a diagram on a grid:

This mile is a wide, well levelled road, but ... at intervals of maybe fifty to sixty yards, steep and long promontories of snow had been flung across — some of them five to six feet high. They started at the edge of the field to the left where a rank growth of shrubby weeds gave shelter for the snow to pile in. Their base, alongside the fence, was broad, and they tapered across the road, with a perfectly flat top, and

with concave sides of a most delicate, smooth, and finished looking curve, till at last they ran out into a sharp point, mostly beyond the road on the field to the right. (S 191, OPT 79-80)

Knowledge permits survival in such a landscape, and knowledge depends on observation, accuracy, an ability to *read the signs*. So willing is the reader to hear the narrative as truth that the ambiguity of these assertions — the way their “science” blurs into “semiotics,” with both these claims on representation being qualified (*maybe, some, and mostly* as well as *left, right, tapered, and concave*) — for a time goes unnoticed. “I knew that kind of a drift,” the narrator asserts (S 190, OPT 78). The detail sounds firm, provided the rhetorical ambivalence is overlooked. The emphasis falls instead on the narrator’s possession of learned — and *useful* — information: “I carefully lighted my lantern” (S 190, OPT 78), “I had a Clark footwarmer and made sure ... it functioned properly” (S 190, OPT 78-79), “I weighed Dan [the less reliable of his two horses, he says] with my eyes” (S 190, OPT 79), “I knew the road” (S 192, OPT 82), “I managed to hold them in line ... I measured the distance with my eye ... But then I knew that a north-south road will drift in badly only under exceptional circumstances” (S 193, OPT 82-83). This paradigm continues in a sequence declaring that sensory observation leads to knowledge, that knowledge confers power, and that “I” sees and knows, reasoning (as though conclusively) that “I” therefore acquires authority.

This appeal to authority derives also from the way the language of measurement bleeds into the language of scientific description:

Had I been a novice ... the sight that met my eye might well have daunted me ... From the fence on the north side of the road a smoothly curved expanse covered the whole of the road allowance and gently sloped down into the field at my left. Its north edge stood like a cliff, the exact height of the fence, four feet I should say. In the centre it rose to probably six feet and then fell very gradually ... I believe I can say from my observations that if no new snow falls or drifts in, and if no very considerable evaporation takes place, a newly piled snowdrift, undisturbed except by wind-pressure, will finally settle down to about from one third to one half of its original height, according to the pressure of the wind....

The surface of this drift ... showed that curious appearance that we also find in the glaciated surfaces of granite rock and which, in them, geologists call exfoliation.... ‘Adfoliation’ would be a more nearly cor-

rect appellation of the process. But from the analogy of the appearance I shall retain the more common word and call it exfoliation.

(S 191-92, OPT 80-81)

"Science" appeals here in two ways: as the private language of an elite, trained group (the passage clearly reiterates the narrator's claim to be a pedagogue), and (despite the concessions rendered by the words *if*, *about*, *very*, and *more nearly correct*) as the exact language that accurately describes the workings of Nature. If the terms are precise, this rhetoric suggests, then the actions that follow from them must be logically based in "natural" rules. If natural, moreover, they must be real; if real, they must be true. The narrative observations of landscape, landform, and weather, in other words, reconfirm the appeal to empirical truth. All is consequently in place, ignoring the argumentative leaps in this implicit syllogism, to accept the narrative's overt claim on credibility.

3. Of Course, the Reasonable Man

This claim is, however, as verbal as it is numerical. Consider a word such as "apodeictically," which shows up in the third paragraph of "Snow." Meaning "appealing to incontrovertible evidence," the word is the narrator's. Although the sensibility to which it refers is ascribed in the text to the "pale and hollow-eyed" (S 187, OPT 74) school janitor (who is the first to tell Grove-the-narrator that the blizzard will prevent him from undertaking his journey), Grove, *of course*, knows better. It is the force of the "of course" that colours the passage and helps shape the reader's sense of narrator, for it functions in two ways. "Snow" begins with apparent precision ("Wednesday morning"), then within three paragraphs gives way to a relative modification of an absolute ("It was that *rather* common *truly* western combination ... that makes walking *next to impossible*"; develops by means of the indirect trope of litotes ("I *cannot exactly say* that I viewed it with *unmingled joy*"); assertively lays claim to a vague experiential authority ("I *had been lost* in a blizzard *once or twice* in my lifetime"); and, as if it were the logical consequence of this experience of repeatedly going out in the snow and getting lost, affirms his superiority to the Cockney janitor ("I, *of course*, never encouraged him in his communicativeness" [S 187, OPT 73-74; emphasis added]). The "of course" suggests an absolute precision of logical paradigm, a claim upon authority that invites an unquestioning acceptance of the narrator's version of events; coupled with the rhetoric of relative uncertainty and obvious

qualification, however, phrases such as “of course” call attention here to the narrator’s ego. By doing so, they perhaps also relieve the ego of any claim on authority, exclusivity, and the power of absolute knowledge (about nature, land, people, station), and hence suggest that the claim on the absolute contains within it the flaw that proves its own unreliability.

The narrator’s claims to be knowledgeable begin, then, to reveal the incredibility of his tale at the same time as they insist upon its “scientific” credibility. In the narrative rhetoric, “of course” does a verbal dance with “as if”: the assertive meets the comparative, in a kind of sustained stichomythia. The narrator tells fanciful anecdotes, then follows with logical paradigms, the exchange building an incremental sequence that “proves” how easy it is for a seemingly rational, “evidence”-based *claim* on truth to sound convincing. This result draws on the willingness of a listener/reader to *trust narrative*, to accept assertion (in rhetorical practice) for reality (in life); it derives also from the listener/reader’s unquestioning acceptance of the author/narrator’s conventions of society, nature, and land.⁴

One early claim to such authority reveals just how ambiguous an assertion can be, and yet how functional in getting readers/listeners to infer the narrator’s special status and their own commensurate commonality:

The inhabitant of the middle latitudes of this continent has no data to picture to himself what a snowstorm in the north may be. To him snow is something benign that comes soft-footedly over night, and on the most silent wings like an owl, something that suggests the sleep of Nature rather than its battles. The further south you go, the more, of course, snow loses of its aggressive character. (S 188, OPT 74)

Precisely where this Manitoba “north” is, in relation to “middle latitudes,” remains casually unspecified; all that is necessary is for Grove to use the word “north” and a whole set of conventional correlations follows, on which “Snow” subsequently draws: words such as *barren, wild, inhospitable, merciless* (S 191, OPT 74). Hence for Grove to *know* how to deal with *the wild* is to do more than simply claim a particular expertise; drawing on the conventions of wilderness representation, it is also to assert *himself as a man* of special *power*, special *stature*, and special capacities for *civilized and civilizing* behaviour.

The subsequent rhetoric — the tropes of logic, tonally so matter-of-fact, so *un-wild*, so *in-control* — appears to reinforce this impression. “I knew that kind of a drift,” says the narrator; “it is treacherous” (S 190,

OPT 78). *As if* hypothesizes; *of course* explains. To the possibility (*as if*) of drifting opposition, rational thought is an answer:

the snow kept coming down and piling up, *as if* it could not be any other wise. *And as if* to give notice of its *intentions*, the *drift* had completely *closed up my front door*. I *fought* my way to the *school* and *thought*.... (S 188, OPT 75)

The road, moreover, becomes associated with knowledge:

I *knew the road* as well as I had ever known a road. (S 192, OPT 82)

Deviation from it calls for power:

This first *wild plunge* had taken us a matter of two hundred yards into the drift.... And I *managed to hold* [the horses] in line. (S 193, OPT 82)

This power, for awhile, sustains authority:

We turned to the north again, and here, for a while, *the road was very good indeed*; the underbrush to the left, on those expanses of *wild land*, had fettered, *as it were*, the feet of the wind. (S 194, OPT 84)

The imagination nevertheless threatens a renewed disorder:

the *whole field* was dotted with [snow mounds], *as if* there were so many *fresh graves*. (S 195, OPT 85)

The logical mind grants the dangerous force of this opposition but refuses to yield to it:

Of course, it was not like going on a grade.... *As for the road*, there was none left ... And worst of all, I *knew positively* that there would be *no trail* at any time during the winter. I was well aware of the fact that, after it once snowed up, nobody ever crossed this *waste*....

(S 197, OPT 90)

The act of writing circumscribes the dangerous disorder to which the (emotional?) imagination can lead:

Maybe ... one day I shall write down a fuller account of my *observations*. In this *report* I shall have to restrict myself to a few indications, for this is *not the record of the whims* of the wind, but merely *the narrative of my drives*. (S 198, OPT 91-92)

Logical assertion confirms but controls the magnitude of the danger:

here in the snow [the craters] were on a much larger scale, *of course*
(S 199, OPT 94)

The danger can even be quantified into manageable format:

I might have known it, of course. I knew enough about snow Probably ... a first, provisional drift whose long axis lay nearly in a north-south line, had been piled up by the first, northerly gale. Later a second, larger drift had been superimposed upon it at an angle, with its main axis running from the northwest to the southeast. The fold marked the point where the first, smaller drift still emerged from the second larger one. This reasoning was confirmed by a study of the clearing itself which I came to make two or three weeks after. (S 201, OPT 96-97; emphasis added throughout)

Whatever the landscape, in other words, the rhetoric places it under calm control. The act of controlling, moreover, constitutes not only a psychosocial claim⁵ but also a structural paradigm, which the narrative uses to appeal to both a sense of trust and a willingness to accept (as “natural”) a conventional design.

4. Coming to Order

For “Snow” is, in one set of its dimensions, a transformation tale. It tells of a man who, presented with a journey, treats it as a challenge; undergoing the journey will take him through a test, or series of tests, which, when he meets them “manfully,” will win him his goal: home, hearth, freedom, virtue, fair maid. “Snow” does present a few variants here (it’s the horses that “have their freedom ... on reaching home” [S 204, OPT 102]; and as Robert Kroetsch’s poem recognizes, foremost among the variants is the “real” commonplace with which the narrator’s wife — the fair maid of the paradigm — greets him when he finally arrives. “My wife would not surmise what I had gone through” (S 204, OPT 101), Grove’s narrator remarks. Indeed she does not. She does not *surmise* his trip into a conventional adventure, because she does not apparently need to. He might, after all, have travelled from the school in Gladstone to the house in Falmouth by the other way. *The other way?* It turns out he has (deliberately? accidentally? unconsciously?) chosen the most difficult route in the snowstorm, and having made a virtue of that, when he finally arrives in Falmouth, he then proceeds to celebrate his foresight in planning to return to his school by the “main cordwood trail to the towns in the south. It was out of my way, to be sure, but I felt convinced that I could

spare my horses and even save time by making the detour" (S 204, OPT 101). The careful reader will appreciate the game being played here; Grove-the-author makes it clear that Grove-the-narrator has all along been designing artifice. The artifice has, however, so earnestly (if self-servingly) affirmed itself to be a matter of record — scientific, factual, logical, reasonable — that the narrative asks the reader to accept even the ending as heroic and celebratory rather than antiheroic and parodic. The form of the transformation tale, together with its conventional tropes, invites it.

Nearing the end of his journey, having just accomplished the most daunting and dangerous of his feats, the narrator must cross a bridge:

In due time I came to the bridge which I had to cross in order to get up on the dam. Here I saw ... one more structure built by architect wind.... The snow had very nearly bridged [the "deep master ditch"] ... But below it was hollow — nothing supported the bridge — it was a mere arch, with a vault underneath that looked temptingly sheltered and cosy to wearied eyes. (S 203, OPT 100-01)

Structure, mere, master, hollow, vault: the language invites a metatextual interpretation. The text itself urges the action on. Grove (author-become-his-own-text by this point, estranged into self-awareness) now surrenders the lead to his horses; they take him home; and the narrative vocabulary spells out the tropes of transformation. "It *seemed* a lifetime since I had started out," he declares; "I *seemed* to be a different man." Is this still a "documentary" declaration? Or has the claim on uncompromised truth already been exposed as itself a rhetorical trope, a convention that appears in every "documentary form"? The west and the setting sun are certainly conventional signs of closure; so is a turn towards the light, and Grove writes, after his wife welcomes him, finally, "*taking her arm*, I looked at *the westering sun* and *turned* towards the *house*" (S 204, OPT 102; emphasis added).

Because the narrative has been working with conventions of land as well as with conventions of structure and discourse, this claim on "house" has also to be contextualized further. For "house" not only refers to a documentary destination here, it also encodes a set of assumptions about authority (and the *right* to authority). These in turn are rooted in conventional attitudes to space, place, gender, and civilization. For if "house" represents order in this paradigm (with the man as ruler), the distance, the duration, between house and school (space and time coalescing) epitomizes that which is *not-order*, that which is unordered, illogical, wild. In

other words, chaos. The task which the narrator-turned-questor undertakes, in consequence, is nothing short of *taming the wilderness*, of proving himself the *master of Nature*, thus claiming through strength, experience, and the superiority of his knowledge the godlike role of re-establishing order from chaos.

From early on, this ambition is apparent: "As soon as the storm had set in," the narrator claims, "I had instinctively started to work in order to frustrate its designs" (S 189, OPT 76). Yet such a statement is resonant with paradox (the ostensibly rational man claiming *instinct* as his guide, and attributing *design* to the ostensibly chaotic forces of Nature). Far from seeing that he contradicts himself, the narrator uses such paradoxes to reinforce his claim on his own superiority of being. Insofar as readers can see the disparities, it is possible to surmise that Grove-the-author was consciously drawing attention to the artifice of the text; what is less clear (and more doubtful) is whether he might have been using this play to question the social assumptions on which the narrator relies. It is also possible, therefore, to extend any analysis of contradiction to an examination of the tropes that serve the conventional distinction between civilized society and chaotic Nature. These include tropes of gender, politics, size, and opposition — all of them related to tropes involving the "natural" (now meaning "uncivilized") forces of intrusion and interference.

5. He, She, and It

"Snow" addresses questions involving sexuality not only overtly — that is, in the narrator/husband's declarations of his desire to be with his wife — but also allusively, in the gendering of both the narrator's journey and the landscape through (and over) which he travels. Grove-the-author perhaps did not intend this self-declared *record of his drives* to be read for its sexual implications, nor many of the narrator's words to be read as innuendo, but the journey is a psychological trope here as well as a formal convention. It functions as a test or proof of the narrator's manliness in addition to being the medium through which he becomes transformed; the landscape and the weather, moreover, provide him with the agents of opposition against which he must measure himself and gauge his capacity for endurance.

Repeatedly, Grove personifies (or otherwise animates) Nature's manifestations. The winter sun, for example, is represented as male, its sub-horizon dawn referred to as "a strictly localised angry glow." Male, and emotionally aroused, it turns almost at once into a rival, an enemy: "In a very few minutes he would be up, and I counted on making that first

mile just before he appeared" (S 191, OPT 79). When the "rabbit"-like wind-driven snow then behaves "as if" it "meant to have a look at me" (S 191, OPT 80), it seems not only that the narrator construes himself as the centre of the universe but also that he attributes to all aspects of natural action the sense of rivalry that seems to arouse him. The maleness of his competitive desire for power seems undeniable: his references to measuring distance, for example, or to the "staying power" (S 193, OPT 83) and rhythmic plunging (S 202, OPT 98) of his horses (Peter and Dan), or to the shapes that the wind has carved (shapes that resemble "formidable" animals: a tropical gorilla, a boa constrictor that has "reared and raised its head ..., ready to strike at its prey," S 200, OPT 94), or to the "promontories" (S 193, OPT 83) and the long lines of "tall poplars" and "telephone posts" (S 194, OPT 84).⁶ Quite directly he specifies his *enjoyment* of "the clear sparkle and glitter of the virgin snow" (S 193, OPT 83), and he recognizes the "clearing caused by a bush fire which a few years ago had penetrated thus far into this otherwise virgin corner of the forest" (S 201, OPT 96-7). The landscape is openly gendered, and the sexuality of the narrator's engagement with it is apparent. Rivalry itself, however, as much as a desire for conquest, seems to motivate the action here — the "formidable" gorilla of the snow-shapes, for instance, explicitly "stands on its four hands and raises every hair on its back and snarls in order to frighten that which it is afraid of itself" (S 200, OPT 94). Fear of what, in the narrator's case? Uncertainty (lack of adequate "knowledge")? Failure (absolute or comparative)? Or perhaps an ego-centred sad dissatisfaction with "success"? The "record" of the storm, by the end of the journey, is "written in fallen tree trunks ... not in drifts of snow" (S 204, OPT 101).

The fact of gendering is itself conventional rather than innovative; so is the political use to which the gendering of landscape is put. For in "Snow," as elsewhere, construing the traveller as male and the landscape as female (to be "penetrated") asserts a conventional masculine claim on power:

There was not a wrinkle in this inverted bowl. There it lay, smooth and slick — curled up in security, as it were, some twenty, thirty feet across.... This had been a stretch, covered with brush and bush, willow and poplar thickets; but my eye saw nothing except a mammiferous waste, cruelly white, glittering in the heatless chuckling sun, and scoffing at me, the intruder. I stood up again and peered out. To the east it seemed as if these buttes of snow were a trifle lower; but maybe the ground underneath also sloped down. I wished I had trav-

elled here more often by daytime, so I might know. As it was, there was nothing to it; I had to tackle the task. And we plunged in.

I had learned something from my first experience in the drift one mile north of town, and I kept my horses well under control. Still, it was a wild enough dash. Peter lost his footing two or three times and worked himself into a mild panic. But Dan — I could not help admiring the way in which ... he would slowly and deliberately rear on his hindfeet and take his bound. For fully five minutes I never saw anything of the horses except their heads. (S 196, OPT 87-8)

Nearing the climax of his story, moreover, it “took a supreme effort on my part to make [the horses] obey” (202), the narrator writes.

By a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, the claim on power turns into a claim on imperial authority — that is, on the right to claim, the right to rule, and the validity of the “civilization” that reconfirms this hierarchical precedence of “powerful” man over “wild” nature. The narrative paradigm here — in which man tames the wilderness — can thus be read both for its gender politics and for its commentary on social politics. In travelling, that is, the male narrator claims to be proving his masculinity by demonstrating his power over a female wilderness, or perhaps (also) to be proving his masculinity by subduing the “wilderness” elements (still construed as female) within his own nature. More indirectly, the narrative is also using this gendered paradigm to assert the authority of an imperial European version of civilization over the wilderness that the narrator identifies with Canada. Grove introduces this motif early, when the school janitor (he of the “apodeictic” utterance) is characterized as an “exceedingly bad-humoured cockney, who was dissatisfied with all things Canadian” (S 187, OPT 73). While this comment appears initially to set him apart from the narrator, it soon transpires that at least to some degree they share its presuppositions. The narrator spends the evening before he sets out on his journey, that is, with a “charming lady” and “her husband” who with “a young Anglican curate constitute the only circle of real friends I had in town”; he *dresses* for the occasion, and after supper with his host and “radiantly amiable” hostess — in the “sheltered, homelike and protected” house on a “side street” in this town — they settle back “to talk old country. The Channel Islands, the French Coast, Kent and London — those were from common knowledge our most frequently recurring topics” (S 189, OPT 77). The linked set of epithets here — *dress, charm, marriage, radiance, friendship, amiability, Englishness, shelter, protection, reality* — affirms the norm (of an ordered, orderable

world) by which to gauge *as chaotic* the otherwise unimaginable extremities of unpredictability, distance, and storm.

Specific aesthetic conventions construct these versions of order and chaos and of the oppositional tension between them. For all its concern with scientific data and its record of the "realities" of Manitoba, then, the rhetoric of "Snow" appears less to question the equation between Canada and chaos than to reconfirm the power of European order to "master" the un-garden-like, and therefore *sublime* (awe-inspiring, terror-producing, *barren* [S 191, OPT 80]) wilderness. What the narrative further asserts is the power of narration itself to master chaos. The *language* of authority takes control of the subject, that is, explicates it, endeavouring to demonstrate its (European, trained, learned, logical, male) superiority to (Canadian, natural, chaotic, animal, female) wilderness, partly through the conventions of literary form.

6. So Big, So Strong, So Magical ...

For the mastery that is represented by language, form, and social convention to have any stature, however — *in the terms of appraisal that the narrator is using* — the wilderness alternative to conventional order cannot be dismissed as negligible, for that would make the ostensible mastery itself of little consequence. The imagery, emphasizing size and battle, consequently magnifies the distance and the storm — and verbally *constructs* extreme conditions (which is not to underestimate the empirical realities of prairie winters, but rather to stress the role that the language plays in this particular response to them) in order to elevate even more the narrator's own sagacity, strength, and power to retrieve rank, system, and discipline from the threat of disarray.

The concern for size, for extremes, is clear from the beginning, when the "rather common truly western" blizzard makes walking "next to impossible" and might make travel "quite impossible" — especially for a man who initially says he has been "feeling rather bad" the week before (S 187, OPT 73) and who therefore sets himself up as an *ordinary* man facing *unequal* odds. His quick series of assertions of *what he knows* soon puts the lie to the mock humility, but the continuing characterization of the enormity of land and extremity of weather stresses not size alone but size as a sign of a kind of wilderness lawlessness, an abandonment of the usual conventions. Twice the storm is referred to as an "orgy" (an indulgence of Titan Wind [S 187, OPT 74], in which Nature is engaged [S 200, OPT 95]), reiterating the sexuality of wilderness. It is the unfettered,

the unsafe, and the unconstrained for which the narrator has to prove himself a match. Even before the blizzard begins, *scaling* a six-foot snow-drift and *breaking in* makes the "task" of walking "tiring in the extreme" (S 188, OPT 75); when he does set out for the weekend ride, he knows that "a supreme test" (S 190, OPT 78), calling for "supreme effort" (S 202, OPT 98), lies ahead. Superlatives take over his vocabulary and his cast of mind. Awestruck, he soon feels that he "had challenged a force in Nature which might defy all tireless effort and the most fearless heart" (S 194, OPT 85), but determines to meet it head-on.

Man not only meets Animal Nature here, but does so by facing the biggest, the worst, the most dangerous the wilderness kingdom can thrust in his way: snow like a boa, a gorilla (S 200, OPT 94), snow holes "on a much larger scale" (S 199, OPT 94), crests of snow like "the wide back of a large fish" (S 199, OPT 92), a drift with a "flank" (S 203, OPT 99), a "last, inhuman drift" that calls for a "last wild struggle" (S 204, OPT 101). The narrator, however, claims to be equal to the task and superior to the opposition: "I began to enjoy [the snow] just as the hunter in India will enjoy the battle of wits when he is pitted against a yellow-black tiger. I began to catch on to the ways of this snow; I began, as it were, to study the mentality of my enemy. Though I never kill, I am after all something of a sportsman" (S 198, OPT 90-91). The forces of opposition, then, are concurrently characterized as *enemy* and as *gigantic*, combining the world of (sportive?) military reality with that of folk myth and fairytale. The combination reinforces yet again the way the text appeals at once to observed detail and unexamined conventions. Alluding to Titan Wind at one moment, the text goes on to explain the difference between exfoliation and adfoliation; the scientific terminology thus suggests the "truth" of the fairytale metaphor:

[The wind] had scooped out a funnel-shaped crater which seemed to open into the very earth like a sinkhole. The next pole stood like a giant buried up to his chest and looked singularly helpless and footbound ... The whole surface of this gigantic drift showed again that 'exfoliated' appearance which I have described. (S 194, OPT 84-85)

Not unlike the maelstroms, the quicksands, and the gorilla-ridden jungles of popular romance, the "sinkhole" here *constructs* the threat of danger. The military metaphors extend it:

Right in front ... a fortress of snow lay now: a seemingly impregnable bulwark ... with rounded top, fitting descriptions which I had read of the underground bombproofs around Belgian strongholds —

those forts which were hammered to pieces by the Germans in their first, heartbreaking forward surge in 1914. (S 195-96, OPT 87)

The waves of the ocean rise up and reach out and batter against the rocks and battlements of the shore, retreating again and ever returning to the assault.... (S 197, OPT 90)

And again the snow was thrown up into a bulwark ..., resembling a miniature Gibraltar ...: bulwarks upon bulwarks, all lowering to the south. In these the aggressive nature of storm-flung snow was most apparent. They were formidable structures; formidable and intimidating, more through the suggestiveness of their shape than through their size. (S 199-200, OPT 94)

The narrator himself wears a "military fur cap" (S 190, OPT 79); barren land turns into battleground "waste" (S 197, OPT 90); a snowdrift "like a gigantic barricade" (S 200, OPT 95) brings the military and the fairytale metaphors together, and the next time "exfoliation" is mentioned (S 202, OPT 99), again appealing to credibility, it introduces the climactic episode, when natural danger is greatest and manly accomplishment proves greater still. The danger, as these passages make clear, is that Nature in these extremes is "pre-adamic" (S 194, OPT 85), "savage" (S 191, OPT 80), *uncivilized*, waiting on the narrator to return moral *order* to amoral *chaos* (S 192, OPT 82), however temporarily, and with whatever means of artifice lies at his command.

7 ... and So Unlikely

For, *of course*, "Snow" works most effectively when seen most clearly as artifice. That's the point of Kroetsch's calling F.P. Grove "old liar" (452). All along it's been apparent, if a listener were alert, that "Snow" is a *tale*, an exaggeration — and the effect of Kroetsch giving the wife the last word is that it undercuts all the narrator's claims to the superhuman and the extraordinary and returns the voice of narration from the self-consciously literary to the local vernacular. (Grove's own text itself makes use of this distinction, as the several tree references indicate: the language shifts from "grove" [S 194, OPT 84] and "copse" [S 195, OPT 86] to "majestic bluff" [S 200, OPT 94], with all that these words imply.) It remains possible, however, that Grove was deliberately elaborate in his narrative play but fundamentally serious in his appeal, by means of this play, to the conventions of Cartesian landscape, Adamic rule, gendered authority, European social order, and the necessity of celebrating the representative manly

hero. Whatever else, ego does not seem playful in “Snow.” And the sketch’s recurrent epic techniques — the extended (in this instance “scientific”) descriptions, the catalogues (of snowdrifts), the specific Homeric allusions — all suggest that the paradigm of self-as-epic-hero appealed to Grove. For *hero*, also read *model*.

The familiar parallels between the prairie and the sea furnish ready examples of the narrator as sailor, Odyssean prototype. From the assumption of *barren land*, it is a short step to Homeric allusion: “the infertile waste around ... two Greek words formed on my lips: Homer’s Pontos atrygetos — the barren sea” (S 195, OPT 86). Subsequently,

I understood why those Homeric words had come to my lips.... This was indeed like nothing so much as being out on rough waters and in a troubled sea, with nothing to brace the storm with but a wind-tossed nutshell of a one-man sailing craft. I knew that experience for having outridden many a gale in the mouth of the mighty St Lawrence River. (S 197, OPT 90)

The text pushes the reader to accept the Homeric passages as “report” rather than as “whim,” but it sidesteps one other option (that of deliberately exaggerating, or lying) even while it declares openly that the passages are *narrative*. The section of the text that concludes with the narrator’s statement “this ... is ... merely the narrative of my drives” begins with a broad metatextual hint: “the surface of the sea is a wonderful book to be read” (S 198, OPT 91). This narrated wintry prairie is, self-declaratively, a sea of words. Artifice comes into the foreground.

Earlier, the narrator admits he has become aware that “the hostler had not been fibbing after all” (S 194, OPT 85) when talking about the difficulties of winter travel, but he never quite specifies that the opposite might also be the case: that the “truth-teller” might be lying. Yet at that English dinner party that precedes the whole arduous journey, talk of the “cold country” has clearly turned from reminiscence to invention:

It was not very long before the conversation got around — reverted, so it seemed — to stories of storms, of being lost, of nearly freezing. The boys were sitting with wide and eager eyes, afraid they might be sent to bed before the feast of yarns was over. I told one or two of my most thrilling escapes, the host contributed a few more, and even the hostess had had an experience, driving on top of a railroad track for several miles, I believe, with a train, snowbound, behind her. (S 189, OPT 77)

That word “even” still insists on a gendered hierarchy, whatever the

double force of "I believe" (to declare belief, to sow the seeds of doubt); it is the men here who claim themselves most earnestly to be adventurers, who (out of whatever desires and dissatisfactions) project the archetype of the adventurer as a manly version of self; and it is boys who most readily, most willingly believe them. To return to the climax of this narrative, then, is to see how it "records" not scientific documentary but the capping moment of an anecdotally embroidered *adventure*. The narrator is driving his team along the snow that has piled higher than the treetops:

I did not realize at first that we were high. I shall never forget the weird kind of astonishment when the fact came home to me that what snapped and crackled in the snow under the horses' hoofs, were the tops of trees. Nor shall the feeling of estrangement, as it were — as if I were not myself ... ever fade from my memory — a feeling of having been carried beyond my depth where I could not swim — which came over me when ... I took in the fact ... that I was above that forest world which had so often engulfed me. (S 202, OPT 98)

Escaping the forest and riding the sky. Anecdote after anecdote. "Snow," despite all its claims upon documentary — indeed, even in its claims to be true — is a Baron Munchausen tale retold. It conjoins the apparent accuracy of photograph with the murkier "maze" of (crafted?) forgetfulness (S 203, OPT 99). And after the most outlandish (or at least off-landish) of its claims, it trips swiftly to its conventional conclusion.

8. Hiding the Husband : Picture Windows '22

One further comment derives from an apparently casual observation that Grove's narrator makes early on, while he is still testing the strength of the storm. In the same paragraph in which Titan Wind is indulging in an orgy on "our western prairies" (S 187, OPT 74), before he leaves the schoolhouse, he "went upstairs to the third story and looked through a window which faced north. But, though I was now above the drifting layer [he says], I could not see very far" (S 188, OPT 74). Given Grove's penchant for portentous puns ("bluff," for one [see Stich "New World"]; and perhaps "trip"), it is tempting to over-read the word "story" and find in "not being able to see far" an implication that much in the *narrative* is *masked*. Be that as it may, the trope of looking-through-a-window is itself a conventional sign of being distanced from real life, cut off from participation in events, positioned as onlooker — or, perhaps — as narrator of make-believe.

Two stories by Ethel Wilson provide analogous examples, which

suggest how this trope might be further read in Grove. "The Window" and "A drink with Adolphus" (from *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories*, 1961) both deal with single men of late middle age, whose houses have *picture windows*, glass glimpses of landscape-as-picture — in other words, of *others*, conceived, contained, framed, as *picturesque*. In the case of Mr. Willy, in "The Window," the picture window, after having been a conventional backdrop for an even more conventional cocktail party, almost turns into a means of access for a burglar; but at a critical moment, Mr. Willy looks up, and because of a trick of light, sees his own reflected image projected against that of the intruder. The point of the story is that he reads the overlap, recognizes that danger derives as much from himself as from outside himself, and resolves to change his ways. Unlike "The Window," "A drink with Adolphus" presents no such obvious revelation. Set at another cocktail party, this one at a different hillside house in Vancouver, it records the enthusiasms of the owner, a man with the politically charged name Adolphus Bond, for his own view, and over the course of the story it also records the reactions of those who accept his assessment, and of those who do not even bother to look, and especially the reactions of one Mrs. Gormley, who has her own ideas about scenery and who claims the right to an alternative. On the way to the party, that is, she has asked her taxi driver to stop:

'and I'll have ten cents' worth of view.'

The view was certainly superb and worth more than ten cents In ten cents' worth of time, she thought — and she was very happy islanded, lost, alone in this sight — there's nearly all the glory of the world and no despair, and then she told the taxi-man to drive on. (73)

Bond's house, it transpires, is "nice and rather shabby," though its "insides" are "charming" (73). But because it places the view behind glass, the window, oddly, restricts. Less oddly, the choice (of when and where to stop and look) enfranchises.

What Wilson engages with here is the rhetoric of covertness and concealment. *Who sees?* her stories ask. *Who is prevented from seeing? What do they see if they can see? What do they nevertheless miss seeing? And why?* These questions, obliquely, return this geography of reading notes to Grove's "Snow." Grove's narrator, early on, "cannot see very far." Nor can the reader. The one because of a declared interference between observer and observed, the other not because objects are inaccessible but because the language is deliberately arranged so as to misdirect the reader/listener's attention.

The difference between these two perspectives emphasizes the semantic distinction between *concealed* and *covert*; while these words in casual speech both mean *hidden*, etymological sources suggest slight differences in agency (*conceal* > L. *con-celare*, "hide together"; *covert* > L. *cooperire*, "cover"). More significantly, *concealed* has come to mean "disguised so as to be kept from the knowledge of others," whereas "cover" has come to mean "disguised so as to be secretive, sly, and deceitful." Applying this distinction to "Snow" asks not merely how it alters the characterization of the narrator but also how it invites different kinds of engagement *between reader and character* and *between text and social supposition*. Since Douglas Spettigue's 1973 biography of Grove, it has become a critical commonplace to recognize Grove's talent for dissimulation, to see him as an imposter who took on a different history for himself. But in the process of dissimulation, imposters invite others to participate in their masking, and the willingness of these others to participate will suggest the dimensions of the (social, personal) desire that they find attractive — the alternative version of history or reality in which they want to share, and that they find represented, in other words — in the masquerade that the imposter offers to them.

Biographically, Grove offered Canadian critics a version of himself as European nobleman that granted him (and also them, through him) a kind of stature they were all seeking; "sophistication" was the watchword, identified with Europe and with a particular definition of class. But what about the narrator of "Snow"? In some sense his allusions to Kent, London, Homer, and science all reiterate this claim on metropolitan worldliness in rural Manitoba. Even the Baron Munchausen parallel can be read in this context — producing a version of the narrator as a person who is, amusingly, simultaneously *concealing* and *revealing* the truth of events. From this perspective, "Snow" is a comedy, its effects deriving from the reader/listener's ability to hear the narrative as a "thrilling escape," an (oxymoronic? punning?) entertainment, punctured by the narrator's wife's *closing greeting*: "You had a hard *trip*?" But to read the narrative, alternatively, as a *covert* tale is to reassess the relation between mask and desire.

One further definition of *covert* becomes relevant here; in legal terminology (and, once, in common parlance), the word is used as a description of a married woman, meaning *under the cover/ authority/ protection of a husband*. In turn, the word *husband* etymologically means *a man who owns his own house and land, a landholder* — hence the related noun *husbandman* ["tiller of the soil"] and the verb *to husband* ["to manage

prudently," "to cultivate (the soil, the mind, etc.)"]. From the beginning of "Snow," the narrator makes clear that his declared intention in travelling through the blizzard is to assuage his wife's concern, and the sketch closes not (as in Kroetsch's poem) with the wife's interrogative greeting but with the narrator's troped assertion: "*taking her arm, I looked at the westering sun and turned towards the house.*" From this vantage point, taking the frame into account, the reader can begin to see the degree to which "Snow" turns less on a concealed desire to mask as an adventure than on a covert desire to assert entitlement: entitlement to (managerial, social) status — and to imagined authority — attributes that are equated here with "manliness," and troped conventionally as trial-by-adventure, test of power, proof of independence, and claim of prerogative over woman and land. In consequence, it is possible to read "Snow" not only as a "thrilling escape" but also an indirect effort to heighten or enhance the narrator's self-image. The unexamined acceptance of "Snow" as simple "documentary," however, suggests in addition that the rhetorical trope relating adventure and land ownership with masculinity and social status, which has long continued to exert a normative appeal, engages readers in the same set of social assumptions and desires that Grove was obliquely expressing.

NOTES

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¹ The unsigned review in the *Canadian Forum* (May 1923) might well have established this paradigm; it speaks of the book's "authentic description of inland Canadian weather," and describes the "chapter on 'Snow'" as a "good illustration of the writer as naturalist" (Pacey 99); *Saturday Night* in 1925 averred that the book's "main concern is meteorological" (Pacey 100), and the 1923 reviewer for the *Dalhousie Review* found the style to be "clear and concise" and the events recorded with "photographic" fidelity (Pacey 99). In 1973, Margaret Stobie subsequently regrets that "the firm prose of the beginning of *Over Prairie Trails* wavers in the later episodes" when "affectation creeps in with elegant inversions" (73). W.J. Keith, by contrast, noted in 1987 that Grove's seven represented journeys were shaped ("conglomerations" is Keith's word) out of possibly seventy-two journeys that Grove might actually have taken (132); Keith, that is, emphasizes the constructedness of the whole book, the artifice serving to elucidate the observer's complex and shifting relation both with nature and with himself. Patrick Lane's "Afterword" to the 1991 reprint of *Over Prairie Trails* echoes both these readings; Lane alludes to the *stark, severe* realities of prairie winters, but also to Grove's *archetypal* rendering of the journey through snow, his poetic recognition of the beauty in winter silence and his celebration of the human power to overcome adversity.

² In many ways, this article (relating land, language, size, authority, gender, sexuality, desire, and constraint) is a kind of extended footnote to my 1997 book *Land Sliding*, which looks at four ways in which Canadian writing encodes or tropes attitudes to distance, space,

land, and power: as territoriality, as property, as region, and as site. That work in turn draws on numerous other writings in spatial theory, and a fuller bibliography can be found there; I would, nevertheless, single out the following theorists as particularly relevant to the present argument about Grove's "Snow": Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove on landscape metaphor, Barbara Maria Stafford on empiricism and the ideology of design, Ann Bermingham on economics and the picturesque, and Doreen Massey and Beatriz Colomina on space, gender, and sexuality.

³ For ease of reference, I use double pagination throughout, wherever relevant; the S numbers refer to the publication of "Snow" in the Brown/Bennett/Cooke anthology, and the OPT numbers to the 1991 reprint of *Over Prairie Trails*.

⁴ These conventions are aesthetic more than "scientific," drawing in turn on eighteenth-century distinctions between the picturesque and the sublime, as the word "picture" in the following quotation explicitly suggests.

⁵ K.P. Stich ("Narcissism") focusses on the lexical signs of uncertainty in *Over Prairie Trails* and its relation to Freud's sense of the "unheimlich" or "uncanny." Stich writes: "Landscape (i.e., matter, body), weather (i.e., spirit, soul) and language (i.e., consciousness, memory) symbolically mirror [Grove's] narcissistic struggle for perfection. While the environment lets him amplify his Freudian ego or Jungian persona, the implicit conflict between the English and German languages dramatizes his attempt to free himself from his past by concealing it. Like all 'failed' repressions ... this one results in anxiety and partly, at least, accounts for the proliferation of [the adjective] 'strange' and its variants.... When Grove says 'strange' or 'uncanny,' especially in connection with 'home,' he also says 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich.' These German words' literal but obsolete meanings are 'homely' (i.e., home-like) and 'unhomely'; their respective modern meanings of 'secret' or 'concealed' and 'uncanny' overlap" (34). Stich goes on to argue that Grove's use of the word "exfoliation" is an invitation to the reader to "leaf out" or "page apart" his text (37), but that, while the entire text can be read for its defensive autobiographical revelations of Grove's "double identity," this identity, in turn, leads Grove by means of his "analytic insight and editorial control" to a way of at least temporarily facing his illusions and of ending "his creative struggles on a positive note" (39).

⁶ Critics have found other ways of reading these comparisons. Attacking the idea of "intentional fallacy," for example, Patricia Morley finds the images in "Snow" to be "macabre, ludicrous, slightly sinister, in keeping with the fury of blizzard conditions" (229); Morley's main concern, however, is to demonstrate that Grove's "scientific" and "conservationist" interests are expressed through the sensibilities of a self-conscious poet (229). Certainly Grove himself thought of this writing as "not only great prose, but real poetry to boot," and in a letter to his wife Catherine observed that, in his account of the "seven drives on Manitoba trails," he was finding that he was "starting to condense my whole feeling of the North into them When I read them, I melted again by my own fire, if you know what I mean. There is not only Nature and observation, there is even a touch of greatness in them" (Makow 54-55).

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