

## MOIRA DAY

### THE PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST IN OLD AGE: GWEN PHARIS RINGWOOD'S *THE LODGE*

*The Lodge*, une des dernières comédies écrites par Ringwood, conclut avec une fête de famille organisée pour souligner l'anniversaire de la grand-mère Jasmine. Pour la matriarche adorée, dotée d'un penchant pour les arts, la célébration est un jugement, un vigile; avec sa famille, elle se demande quelle valeur et quelle identité—humaine, artistique, économique—sont la sienne dans son vieil âge. Ne sommes-nous en fin de compte rien de plus qu' « un morceau de porcelaine cassé, toutes les pièces toujours là mais plus assemblées »? Notre vie est-elle traversée par des fils psychiques ou artistiques plus grands qui tissent « les objets divers et les bouts assortis de toute une vie » pour en faire un récit personnel plus important?

Reflet de préoccupations semblables exprimées par Ringwood dans les lettres qu'elle a écrites, les entretiens qu'elle a accordés et les conférences qu'elle a données vers la fin de sa vie, *The Lodge* capte un peu l'ironie et l'ambivalence d'une personne qui lutte avec la multiplicité du « soi »—celui que l'on crée, et celui que d'autres fabriquent. Ringwood écrivait la pièce en 1977 et la révisait au cours des deux années suivantes; elle avait alors presque soixante-dix ans et approchait la fin d'une longue vie productive. Le résultat est une sorte d'autoportrait de l'artiste en dame plus âgée.



"I'm hoping the chapter on my life will be as restrained as possible when it comes to personal matters and will chiefly place my work in context with my life at the time the work was written. I think that is the more dignified and interesting approach." (Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Letter to Geraldine Anthony, 30 November 1976)<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to Elsie Park Gowan dated 30 January 1975, Gwen Pharis Ringwood wrote:

Damn—I wanted so much to write a truly fine play—but I wanted to be mother, wife, housekeeper, gardener, mrs. [sic] doctor, adjudicator, teacher ... so I nibbled at them all ... well I've still got a chance to write a play that hangs together—I hope *The Lodge* is it. But I'm not at all sure—too many people—too

discursive or digressive—but perhaps I'll fix it yet.  
Hope is waiting for Godot to come.<sup>2</sup>

Gowan responded, “Know what you mean. ‘I nibbled at them all.’ Was lately asked to write my biography for something called ‘Women’s Who’s Who’ and when put down it’s a very confoosing [sic] record. What AM I? Teacher...radio writer ... playwright ... lecturer, etc. etc” (Letter, 3 February 1974). Eight years later, she added, “*The Collected Plays* makes me very proud to know you. My favorite is *The Lodge* (perhaps because it’s the most like the one I might have writ myself!) Cynical remark. [...] And what a part for a 60 year old! Dammit, why do I have to be 77?” (17 July 1983).

The above exchange captures three points of significance mirrored in other correspondence and writing from Ringwood’s later years. The first, and perhaps most important, was Ringwood’s sense, at least in later life, of a profound tension between her two worlds: one the inner, artist-controlled world of ecstasy, vision, and transcendence manifesting itself in the disciplined completion of the aesthetic form; the other, an outer, externally-controlled world of accelerating changes, necessities, and responsibilities that pressured not just the artist but the very self to fragment into a growing collection of multiple personas or roles in order to accommodate all the diffuse, open-ended demands of life. Was this explosion of the self into multiple facets in one’s actual life simply a healthy completion of the same creative impulse that led towards the proliferation of multiple fictional “selves” or characters in the artistic realm, of a “familiar and voracious need to know everybody on earth, know them in all their infinite diversity” (Appetite)? Alternatively, did the constant “nibbling” ultimately lead to a nibbling away of both the artist and the self—a gradual dissolution of the inner world that allowed the artist to exist and function and to produce even one “truly fine play”—and beyond that, to a deeper fragmentation of the personal self into a scatter of externally defined and controlled roles?

The second significant point is Ringwood’s expressed “hope” that *The Lodge*, despite its discursive or digressive tendencies, was going to be the one “truly fine play”<sup>3</sup> that pulled together all the divergent strands of her mature vision. While she was critical of her own tendency to leave too much of her work in an unfinished state, “partly due to the fact that I often put everything else first” (Letter to Wagner, 23 June 1974), there are signs that she laboured over *The Lodge*. The same letter indicates that she was well into work on the play as early as 1974. Additionally, she rewrote it twice:

in 1978 and in 1979 after its first stage production in 1977 (Rutland 585). Ringwood's continuing preoccupation with the play over 1977-79 is also indicated in her correspondence during that period; she mentions to Anton Wagner that she anticipated being "free of most of the old work, except for *The Lodge*" (29 January 1979) and urged both Clive Marin (6 May 1978) and Geraldine Anthony (31 December 1978) to consider it for further production or critical attention, especially in connection with Anthony's book-length study of Ringwood's life and work.

The third thing to note is that while few modern critics appear to have shared Ringwood's high opinion of the play,<sup>4</sup> Gowan, who was contemporary with Ringwood, was a notable exception. Her own letters to Ringwood show a quick sympathy for similar issues of fragmentation as they relate to one's practice of life and art. Yet Gowan also significantly came of age as both a woman and a theatre artist at a time when the status of women and artists both was in a rapid state of flux, reflecting equally turbulent changes in the Canadian social and cultural scene. Gowan and Ringwood debuted as young women in a Canadian theatre that, dominated by the development of amateur, extension, and educational drama, had never been more encouraging of native female talent; they advanced into middle age at a time when the rising current of professionalism tended to be deeply ambivalent if not outright dismissive in its attitude towards those who had by choice or necessity embraced theatre as an avocation rather than a full-time profession; and they entered old age at a time when the Canadian theatre was again open to reclaiming and reassessing that earlier generation, and the women in particular, as a part of the larger mosaic of both theatrical and women's history and writing in Canada. Significantly, if it was Ringwood who conceived of and wrote the part of Jasmine Daravalle, it was Gowan who wished she could have realized and interpreted the role on stage. Preoccupied with the irony and ambivalence surrounding the interface between life and art and with the sense of wrestling with multiple 'selves'—whether created by oneself or other people—Jasmine appears to have had special resonance for both women as a rare and revelatory portrait of the artist as an older woman.

A contemporary comedy of manners set in the early 1970s, *The Lodge* opens with the revelation that Jasmine Daravalle, the family's beloved, artistically inclined matriarch, has organized a family reunion at Wilderness Lodge to celebrate "her last birthday" (*Lodge* 453). Given the fact that the "spinnny old lady with a

paint box” (440), as her son-in-law calls her, soon sweeps into sight as a vigorous specimen of physical, mental, and spiritual health complete with “colorful poncho, [...] bells, rug, paint box etc” (454), it is difficult for either the audience or the family to ascribe too ominous a meaning to her announcement. Yet it becomes clear as the play goes on that for Jasmine this particular birthday is as much about final judgments and the ending of things as with their beginnings and that she intends this final party to be as much a wake for a life departed as a celebration of one come into being.

Jasmine’s struggle with the question of her actual human, artistic, and economic value in old age inevitably involves her large family as her spiritual, biological, and legal heirs. The struggle has deeper and more personal reverberations for some than it does for others. The most spiritually enlightened characters—the family outsiders, Chief Jimmy Lashaway and his daughter, Marybelle—who are strongly allied with the healing spirit of the earth and the Soda Spring, remain relatively unaffected by the more painful complexities of Jasmine’s search for self-meaning. This is also true of the least enlightened characters: Jasmine’s narrow-minded eldest daughter, Alice, and her grasping, entrepreneurial husband, Eardley. Alice, who is spiritually kin to Hester Warren (*Still Stands the House*) in representing “a fear of change” and “the forces of stagnation and death as against those of change and growth and life” (Letter to Moonulen, 12 February 1979), serves as the butt of much of the play’s social satire. Connie, Jasmine’s second daughter, and her husband, Roland, though suffering from middle-age malaise, still demonstrate a potential for personal self-examination and growth. However, it is the younger generation who are most actively engaged in Jasmine’s own restless quest for “change and growth and life,” and who are struggling with the greatest effort and persistence to find a way to realize those forces adequately in life and art. This group is represented by Robin, the artist son of Jasmine’s late son, James; Quentin, Alice’s off-stage son working on third world development in Africa; and most significantly, Shelley, Alice’s artist daughter, and her husband, Allan.

Shelley is the one who most intimately shares Jasmine’s sense of this birthday marking more profound personal passages than just the flight of another year. In fact, she increasingly emerges in the play as Jasmine’s alter ego—resulting in a poignant portrait of the artist as a young woman existing simultaneously in dynamic tension with her older self. Similarly, in her later years, the older

Ringwood felt haunted by the persistent spectre of the promising young playwright she had once been. Writing to Geraldine Anthony about the possibility of focusing more of the biography on her later self and work, she gently comments,

I agree with Barney that the early chapters of the book seem to be about other subjects [...] or to be searching for the real Gwen Pharis Ringwood amidst a number of interviews with other and highly fascinating people, but people who have not known me for nearly forty years.  
(31 December 1978)

Ringwood's concern over her "real" self being identified too closely with a still or arrested image of a former self etched and preserved in the memories of forty years earlier may have been in part a reflection of her philosophy that life and people—including herself—ideally exist in a constant process of change and growth. Yet her discomfort may also have stemmed from an awareness that that younger self, even as experienced then, may have been as much the stuff of vision and hope as of actuality. There is no doubt that Ringwood was a genuinely talented writer. Yet it was also clearly in the best interests of many people on both sides of the border between 1938 and 1952 to make sure that Ringwood's talent and what was to be perceived by many as her definitive "folk" work from that period, including *Still Stands the House*, were vigorously promoted as much for their potential value as for their current worth.

Nationally, Ringwood's success at home and abroad helped validate the basic tenets of the Canadian Little Theatre movement by producing a theatrical product that Canadian critics could comfortably compare to O'Neill, Hardy, Milton, Synge, Lady Gregory, and even Sophocles. As late as the 1960s she was still one of the very few Canadian playwrights—along with Merrill Denison and Robertson Davies—consistently mentioned in Canadian literary surveys as a significant dramatic voice in the first half of the twentieth century. For American regionalists like Robert Gard and Frederick Koch, who felt that their own theatrical thinking and practice as scholars, teachers, playwrights, and director/producers stood in conscious opposition to the New York commercial theatre for reasons similar to those of the Canadian Little Theatre and regionalist folk play movements, Ringwood's success confirmed the international resonances of what was still criticized in some quarters as an exotic but relatively unimportant theatrical movement happening outside the contemporary theatrical hub of New York.

The 1939 publication of *Still Stands the House* in Koch's anthology *American Folk Plays* was a significant move that ensured Ringwood's work would be distributed to a much broader audience than it otherwise would have reached. Even by June of that year the *Lethbridge Herald* reported that the play had started to bring royalties for the author "from various parts of Canada, the United States and England" ("Proud").

Koch also made generous mention of Ringwood in other speeches and articles as one of the most notable international successes of the playwriting program. He clearly had hopes that Ringwood, who had graduated from the masters program in English and Drama at the University of North Carolina in 1939, would be the disciple who spread the folk play movement northwards. This hope was much fueled by her return to Canada and decision to accept the position as Director of Drama for the University of Alberta Department of Extension over 1939-1940. Her appointment to a position that had close links not only to multiple educational and community drama organizations across the province, but also to the Banff School of Fine Arts and its playwriting program, represented to him a welcome opportunity to firmly establish the Playmakers as a Pan-American phenomena. He returned from his 1940 teaching appointment at the Banff School with the news that at least one local Alberta writer felt that "the Banff School of Fine Arts has become a force of great social significance. It is creating a real Canadian People's Theatre" (Carolina 170). In addition he was excited to announce that in "the closing days of the Banff School a permanent organization, The Canadian Playmakers, was formed with Gwen Pharis Ringwood, author of the Dominion Drama Festival prize play *Still Stands the House*, as President." She was to perform this job "from her new home in Goldfields, Saskatchewan, a frontier settlement in the north country, 500 miles away from the nearest railroad and accessible only by bi-weekly airplane and an occasional boat in the summer" (Carolina 144).

Unfortunately, the practical difficulties involved in Ringwood's move to an isolated community well-removed from urban centres, the birth of her first child, and the increasing seriousness of the war effort did much to dampen that hope. While her work continued to be supported by the University of Alberta, The Banff School, and the Alberta Folklore project over the 1940s and early 1950s, the advent of marriage and children essentially marked a commitment to domestic life and community service that continued to deepen after 1953 with the family's move to

Williams Lake, B.C and their further move to the even more remote Chimney Lake site in the late 1960s.

In later years, Ringwood recognized the decision to marry and have children as one of the important watershed moments that distinguished her early from her more mature self, and at that stage of life she was inclined to count the blessings that had come from that decision. Paradoxically, if the responsibilities of raising a young family restricted her own professional horizons in middle age, she credited her children's experiences as young adults as being an enormously liberating influence on her own social consciousness in old age. While she confessed that her own "leaning towards democratic socialism never took her to the point of committment [sic] to the C.C.F. and the N.D.P.," she found that "literally, our children did much to educate us towards new ways of thinking, new concepts of successful living" (Letter to Wagner, 23 June 1974).

In an undated letter to Enid Delgatty Rutland she elaborated:

The biggest hurdle is believing in one's own work. Believing hard enough to trust that it will come. [...] However without the security of husband and children I'm not sure I'd have much to say. [...] I've fed on my family as an artist as I'm sure Picasso did and many others. They have shown me the way towards work, enriched the work with their perceptions. I married late, and at the time I married I wanted those ordinary experiences more than anything in the world. And now in my aging years I treasure Barney and the children and their children most of all.

Still, she was far from agreeing with the idealistic view of at least one writer in the mid-1940s that she was "full proof that marriage and a career can be successfully combined" ("Stampede"). It was true, she mentioned in a letter to Anton Wagner (23 June 1974), that she had gravitated towards the theatre rather than more private forms of creative expression at least in part because "when I directed other people's plays or directed my own, I felt I was serving the community in a way and the two facets of living merged." Nonetheless, it was a merging that was more balanced in theory than in practice. Over the years, she reflected, the inner world of the self that had produced the writing seemed to have become more and more disjointed from the outer world of the public self with its multiplying roles, duties, and responsibilities to others and the pressure on women in particular to fulfill them:

Although I've never felt myself an oppressed woman, I'm sure my feeling about my role as a woman has had much

influence on the attitude I have had in the past towards writing and on the writing itself. As the wife of a busy surgeon, the mother of four children, and with some extremely conventional attitudes towards what constituted success in the community, I feel now that I've lived a somewhat fragmented life until the past five or ten years. My writing was at times completely absorbing but was walled off in a separate room of my life a good bit of the time.

She wrote even more personally on the subject to Geraldine Anthony (5 Feb 1978), discussing the role that gender may have played in the same sense of fragmentation. Up to a point, she suggested, a woman writer tended to have a more integrated creative life than her male counterpart because the same creative impulse nurtured both her fictional and her real people with fewer boundaries or distinctions. The problem was that the minutiae and routine of real life were both greater and inclined to flow more readily across the boundaries into her writing life. This resulted in her time and attention being distracted from the creative work in a way less often experienced by men:

I think I'm glad I didn't try to talk about the state of the female writer, past or present. This is a complex state ... and both its joys and difficulties are rooted in the very core of one's life. On the surface, one could say—a woman with husband and family is always trying to manipulate the time to write and the time to nurture her living breathing people. Most male writers have a bit less enslavement to the three meals a day, washing, cleaning, birthday party, clock.

Beyond that, however, she wondered if women, at least of her own generation, were actually encouraged to develop the same “core” of being that men were. While the rhetoric of her age had encouraged women to similarly conceive of themselves as strong integrated selves functioning independently in the world, in practice they had remained more constricted and defined by their sexual, family, and community roles. That is, it was not just a question of the female writer having to struggle with more external factors intruding more often into the “room” of her creative mind; there was also a question of whether she could as easily build and keep the same kind of “room” of the mind “walled off” and devoted to writing:

But that is only the surface. The dedicated writer has to be ruthless, most of all with self. Although I grew up in an



atmosphere which championed woman's abilities to succeed in almost every field, I also grew up with a concept of how a 'lady' conducts herself, how a house should be kept, and a rigid concept of sexual morality. The high adventure, the leaving of home, the taking to the open road, the rebellion against the bonds that crippled in the name of love, the travelling alone, the achievement of economic dependency seem as I write to be the prerogatives of men. We were girls for a long time, not women. The enemy for the woman writer seems to me to be her own concept of herself, perhaps her relationship with her mother, and her necessary involvement with mundane detail. These have a bearing on her relationship with husband and children and with her own work.

Yet, paradoxically, she could not easily eliminate "the enemy" without eliminating the source of her greatest nurturing as an artist and as a human being. She concludes thoughtfully:

They are bonds forged late: [sic] Had she been free of those earlier constrictions and confusions of the mores of her society, they can be elastic and enfolding bonds that do not confine anyone. I think. Anyway the probing must go deeper. Because Guilt enters into it ... the sense of sin, not just the old testament [sic] sense of sin, but sin against life.

Shelley, in *The Lodge*, like Ringwood's younger self, stands at a similar watershed moment in the play. Even as Jasmine, the artist in old age, arrives to celebrate her last birthday, Shelley, the artist in youth, contemplates the imminent approach of a first birth day of a very different kind. As in the case of the Romantic poet that her name evokes, Shelley's own coming of age as a young artist was marked by a volatile explosion of idealism, artistic aspiration, and sexual passion that promised to reach even greater heights abroad in the company of kindred spirits. Instead, like her namesake, she experienced the sudden ending of a life and a self in the very environment where she anticipated finding her greatest liberation and fulfillment.

However, where the life of the original Shelley culminated in a tragic drowning accident that tended to fuel the mystique of a brilliant talent untimely destroyed, the experience of "ending" and "submerging" for Ringwood's artist is more psychic and ambiguous in nature. For reasons she cannot articulate clearly, Shelley freely willed the ending of her own highly creative early period of adventure, travel, and sketching with her Bohemian first cousin, Robin. Abruptly deserting her companion in Spain, she has in the

two years since her return to Canada married the more prosaic Allan and moved to the hinterland to run Wilderness Lodge as a resort/wildlife sanctuary with him.

Significantly, Jasmine mentions that she and her husband, Edward, first came to the Lodge in 1953—the same year the Ringwoods moved to Williams Lake—because they had found the Lodge with its near-by Soda Spring “had some sort of a healing atmosphere for us” (456). This was another important reason for Jasmine to have the family reunion there. For Shelley, however, what initially had seemed a sanctuary for her, as well, has simply become the site of her own personal wilderness. She feels trapped in her role as a wife to the pragmatic Allan, who complains that, like her grandmother, she “doesn’t look carefully at things”: “Who ever saw a horse with front legs like that? [...] Things should look like they are. That picture of your grandmother’s. She calls it Flight. There’s not a bird or an aeroplane in it” (441).

Shelley’s productivity as an artist has sharply diminished and she has discovered her sense of entrapment has been deepened by the impending approach of motherhood. Initially she conceived of her pregnancy as almost a romantic, Dionysian revolt against Allan’s stifling tendency to run both their lives strictly according to plan. However, its cold, clinical, recently confirmed reality simply reminds her that she really does not look at things “like they are.” Her initial euphoria over the power of her own fecundity to thwart male control and rationality (she discontinued birth control pills without Allan’s knowledge) has lapsed into a growing sense of panic and personal crisis. Confronted with the physical reality of her altering body and the practical ramifications of its changed nature on the integrity of her prior life and sense of self, she blurts out to Jasmine, her older alter ego, “you can’t go around making wishes if you don’t even know what you want ... if you don’t even know who you are” (464). As she stands fixed between her options—including the possible termination of her pregnancy, of her marriage, or of both—her Muse, in the personification of Robin and her earlier semi-incestuous relationship with him, returns to remind her of an earlier path she might wish to consider again.

However, in the wake of her talk with her older self by the springs, the mystical, healing centre of the play, Shelley once more rejects a life completely dedicated to the pursuit of her art. She has already discovered that the inner world, “the separate room,” has its own limitations as a place to live permanently. She confesses to Jasmine that her life with Robin left her feeling “guilty” rather than

“free” (464). While her unease rises partially from the closeness of their blood relationship, it is also clear that for Shelley, “Guilt enters into it [...] not [in] just the old testament [sic] sense of sin.” It is in the spiritual rather than the physical incestuousness of the relationship—in the narcissistic, ingrown nature of a perpetual life of communion with one’s soul—that the real “sin against life” appears to lie for her. Robin’s vision of them turning, like Bacchus and Philomene, into tall, interweaving trees indistinguishable from each other is for her the image of stasis and the dissolution of the self rather than its fulfillment in “change and growth and life”:

SHELLEY. We were high on pot and wine and the excitement of getting away from home. We didn’t really see Spain. We saw each other, and people like us ... the young travellers.  
ROBIN. We planned to go on ... to join Quentin. To do what he’s done—teach, serve, change things.  
SHELLEY. We talked a lot. I guess I got tired of talk. [...] I have to find my own way, Robin. I have to fight for who I am ... with you there was no fight. We were like twins, trapped in one another. We couldn’t grow. I can’t ever go back with you, Robin. (470)

At the same time, she stubbornly resists Allan’s similar demand that she choose between himself and Robin, her silence and evasion serving as an uncomfortable reminder to the couple of the unsettled status of her Muse in her current life.

Shelley’s decision to reveal her pregnancy to both men and their respective reactions to the news tip the scales strongly in Allan’s favour: there is no room in Robin’s life for “mundane detail” or the enslavement “to the three meals a day, washing, cleaning, birthday party, clock.” There is room in Allan’s, however, once he has realized that Shelley’s biological clock has become the most significant time piece in the regulation of both their lives.

Still, Allan remains disturbed by Shelley and Robin’s tendency to mythologize him into a kind of monster or Hades figure. In the original Greek legend, Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, reluctantly allows his unwilling bride, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, to return to the upper world of the living lest perpetual winter encompass the earth. However, because the dark god has tricked Persephone into eating five pomegranate seeds during her stay with him, she is bound to him forever and forced to return to the Underworld for five months of every year. Is this really the way Shelley perceives him, Allan asks: as a demonic abductor who has snatched her away from her natural upper world of light, warmth, and growth and locked her in an Underworld of spiritual and

artistic winter through a coercive trick involving his seeds?

You seem to want to push me into some role ... the destroyer, the killer ... Not just the cougar. Everything. As if I were out to trap you. I'm not. [...] I may not draw or paint or make pots ... but I can like those things. [...] I like your horses but I can't help seeing that their legs look broken. I'm not out to cripple your talent, trap you. [...] If I really am the man you seem to think I am, you'd better leave me. [...] We've got to more than just hang on, Shelley. That's not good enough. We have to learn how two people can live and grow together and not cripple one another. (484)

In the end, Allan suggests a contrasting image to Robin's that incorporates some of the sense of flexibility and elasticity that Ringwood refers to in her letter to Anthony:

You know what we need? Wings. [...] Something I saw this morning ... the ospreys flying. They'd soar way apart and then they'd fly back together and fly awhile and then off they'd go, flying far apart again but always they'd come together. They looked so free, flying like that. I envied them ... for us. (485)

As the younger artist in the play makes the decision to descend into life to try to find herself among the expanding multiplicity of selves there, the older artist, Jasmine, is beginning to ascend from the depths back towards the light of creative aspiration. Yet there has been a profound transformation of the self involved in her own journey through the world of experience. She is not re-ascending into spring in her younger guise as Persephone, but into the cooler, autumnal light of Indian summer as Demeter, the older, nurturing maternal figure associated with the fertility of the earth and the fulfillment of the harvest. Significantly, Jasmine arrives late for her own party at least in part because "I did some sketches at the river—the old bridge. Such colour. I was full of excitement" (455). Sitting with Jimmy at the brink of the restorative waters of the Soda Spring, and being reminded of its legendary power to grant the wishes of those who drink there, she becomes aware of dreams and vistas opening again, even as the physical days shorten. As Jimmy says:

When they log now, they cut down everything. Then they plant some little spindles so everything will be the same size. They don't want old trees. Maybe they don't want old people. But they don't cut us down yet. [...] What time is left we have. Time to see the sun rise and go down. This

moon shining. [...] Yah. What time is left we have, old woman. (462-463)

That Ringwood conceived the character of Jasmine as an artist rather than a playwright is not coincidental. Again, Ringwood comments to Wagner that part of adapting to life in Northern British Columbia was diversifying her artistic endeavors into “more contemplative, less social forms of expression” including “fiction, short stories and the novel.” Then, after the family’s move to Chimney Lake in the late 1960s, “I finally stopped writing for awhile [...] ... I painted some, sketched, [...] tried to do batik” (23 June 1974).

Ringwood was certainly writing again by the late 1970s, but her letters were beginning to show a growing preoccupation with her painting as well. Confessing to her sense of insecurity as a writer, she commented wryly to Gowan in 1978: “*Stage Voices* got mixed reviews [...]. One critic said that some voices ‘were too dusty for retrieval’ and I found myself deflated, indignant, despairingly at times wondering if I am one of those and should just become a Sunday painter” (25 July 1978).

While the mood passed and Ringwood continued to write, it is perhaps one of the private jokes of the play that while Jasmine changed her public identity from Lydia to Jasmine, but has been a painter all her life, the real artist as an older woman retained the name under which she had established her name as a playwright while privately starting to evolve into a second artistic self as a painter.

Ringwood uses Jasmine to play with identity in other ways. Late in life, caught up with the proliferation of selves accumulated over a lifetime, she too echoes Shelley’s feeling that “I just want to be myself, if I can find out who I am” (484). By the late 1970s, Ringwood had found her reputation as a playwright had gone through a startling number of transformations. In the 1930s and 1940s, she had found herself hailed originally as the upcoming Canadian playwright of her generation precisely because of her ability, at her best, to write like a man:

The prevailing tone here is sombre, austere, tragic. The dramatist comes to grips with situations as universal as the basic struggle for existence, both economic and spiritual. [...] The impression that Gwen Pharis leaves us with is rather one of exaltation; man struggles against a hostile world, struggles, suffers and fails; but man is ennobled by his struggle, never debased, and though dejected and in despair never utterly destroyed; the quality of man is

established largely by the quality of the struggle which he puts up. Though Gwen Pharis is clearly aware of the immensity of the challenge which the prairies offer, this does not destroy her confidence that the spirit of man is unconquerable; the essential note of these [sic] plays, then, is the note of reconciliation and an almost Miltonic resignation. Nothing is here for tears. (Brodersen 6)

Then over the 1950s and 1960s, she found her later work slipping into obscurity because she did not continue to write like a man. "My reputation as a writer," she was to wryly comment in the 1960s, "rises and falls with that house" ("Frogs"). In too many cases an earlier generation of readers, practitioners, and critics who had been attracted to her earlier masterpiece *Still Stands the House* precisely because of its tragic grandeur, its resemblance to the plays of the Irish Renaissance and American folk play tradition, its Depression prairie setting, and its poetic realism were unprepared for a Ringwood who also wrote farce, comedy, and musicals, some of them in a much more diffuse, imagistic style. Ringwood's correspondence during the period demonstrates her growing frustration over the difficulty of getting anthologists to consider any of her work outside of *Still Stands the House* for publication:

I hope you found something of mine suitable for inclusion in your anthology. I especially hope it won't [sic] be *Still Stands the House* ... some of the unpublished work is better, I'm sure. Did you read *The Stranger*, *The Deep Has Many Voices*, *Hatfield*, *The Rainmaker*, *The Drowning of Wasyl Nemitchuk* or *Widger*? Maybe they need rewriting but I honestly think they were better plays than some of the early ones. (Letter to Tait, 22 June 1974).

Even as late as 1973, influential anthologists, such as Eugene Benson, were continuing not just to showcase the play as Ringwood's masterpiece but to validate its merit to readers in terms of its connections to the dominantly male literary tradition: "*Still Stands the House*, like much of the fiction of Thomas Hardy (which also manipulates unscrupulously details of circumstance), has the direct and raw force of folk tragedy" (31).

Finally, in the 1970s and 1980s, she found herself being celebrated again by critics such as Lister, Bessai, Lynde, Wagner, Anthony, and Ryga for the playwright she might have been had the Canadian theatre been ready to turn professional when she was, or had it been less patriarchal in its attitudes and structures and thus less marginalizing of the work of women:

A course on modern drama offered here at York has twenty playwrights on its reading list—all of whom are male. When asked about the lack of woman dramatists, the prof said he didn't 'know of any women who write good contemporary drama.' [...] No good contemporary women playwrights? Hardly. Talk to Gwen Pharis Ringwood. She'll set you straight. (Wilson)

While there is every sign that in later life Ringwood enjoyed the growing recognition of her work, she also appears to have remained a bit bemused by it. On September 10, 1981 she wrote to Enid Rutland:

I am to receive an honorary degree from the University of Victoria on November 28 [...] in fine arts ... head is swelling of course to fit that mortar board ... I hope I don't trip going up the steps. ... This was quite a surprising event and is happening when they are dedicating a new theatre at University of Victoria. Mind you I probably qualify as a token senior citizen, token woman, token country person, token country person from the interior but I hope some of my work will justify this and that I wont [sic] stop working.

Jasmine demonstrates a similar wry sense of humour towards her own status as the family's matriarch. Age has brought her power and authority of a kind. Wielding a moral and spiritual authority that other family members defer to even when they disagree with her, she also possesses the money and material resources to put her benign, nurturing influence into action on behalf of family members. In fact, the whole family reunion/birthday party is a testimonial to her matriarchal power and influence over the family. At the same time, the events of the weekend also reveal to her that that power is in many ways as fragile, illusory, and fleeting as the warmth and sun of the Indian Summer surrounding the Lodge. At best, even the younger, more idealistic members of the family, like Robin, appear to value her less for herself than for the legitimacy her acquired authority and resources might lend to their own schemes, plans, and agendas. At worst, the more materialistic members make it clear to her that she is legally and economically more valuable to them either dead or discreetly retired from the world than alive and active in it.

If anything, Jasmine's increasing awareness of how her status as a matriarch has started to frustrate the forces of "change and growth and life" that she has always championed cements her resolve that this will indeed be her last birthday. Unlike the dead

cougar that had started to pose a threat to the humans in its environment, for all its natural beauty and power, because when challenged it “had no escape route”(488), Jasmine has been careful to create one for herself. It is time to dispose of a life and a self on her own terms while she still can.

In the climactic scene of the play, Jasmine reveals that she has also summoned her family to the Lodge to let them know what decisions she has made about the family properties held in her trust: the High Valley Ranch and the Soda Spring. Over the last five years, she mentions, she has had letters from all of them about the ranch:

You not only remember it. You all have made great plans for it. [...] Robin suggests that High Valley could be a retreat for creative people. [...] Cora [Robin's sister] visualized a centre for women, a place to discuss their problems, to help one another. [...] Toby, my nephew, wanted a wild life compound. [...] Your letters, Connie. You would turn High Valley into a retirement village. You and Roland would administrate it from the Ranch House and you invite me to live in the cottage by the creek. You make it sound very pleasant. [...] These letters from Eardley and Alice are offers—cash offers—for the ranch. [...] Shelley and Quentin never asked for the ranch ... they do say they hope it will stay in the family. (482)

She takes some delight in telling the family that the property was sold four years ago to the government as a heritage site for a good price and the money spent endowing a school in Africa. As for the Soda Spring, she announces:

I came here planning to give the Soda Springs, and the land around it to all of you, together. [...] I've changed my mind. [...] This morning I realized that it's too late for you to nurture the land, and too late for it to heal you. Sooner or later you'd spoil what's there, defile the mystery. And when the mystery is gone, the land would become your enemy. (488)

She returns the Spring to its initial, aboriginal owners, “providing it is left as it is now for a hundred years” (488).

That just leaves the somewhat more discomfoting disposal of herself. Jasmine reveals to her surprised family in the last scene that this will be her last birthday with them because she has decided that to live means to leave: “That's why I wanted to see you all ... I wanted to make a clean breast ... say goodbye. I'm going to Australia. I've been offered a chance to teach, and study Maori Art



[...] So the slate's clear. We're all tidied up" (486, 488). When Alice protests that Jasmine can't leave, that they still have unfinished emotional business from the past to resolve, Jasmine gently counters that it is not just herself she is freeing by this. It is an act of love to them as well: "Maybe I'm setting you free, Alice. All of you" (488).

Sadly, despite its virtues, *The Lodge* was not to prove the play that Ringwood had hoped it would be. Her concerns that it might have "too many people" or be "too discursive or digressive" appear to have been prophetic. Additionally, its deeper more somber themes and poetic symbolism did not always sit comfortably with its whimsical contemporary satire, especially within the demands and constraints of the realistic form. As Ringwood was to concede in her thoughtful 1980 essay "Realism and Its Discontents," this may have been a reflection of an ongoing struggle between form and vision in her work that had not been completely resolved in *The Lodge*. As she admitted, "I labored and wrestled against the constraints of realism in action and language, and the many drafts of *The Lodge* testify to that struggle."

By 1979 it was a struggle that Ringwood tacitly acknowledged that she had lost. In a letter written to Wagner (17 December 1979) she discussed her work on a new short play, *The Furies*, then commented, "[If] I do another long play I want it to be different from any I have done so far ... not as conventionally arid as *The Lodge* and more unified than *Mirage* and more concentrated in its dramatic poetry than *Remembrance of Miracles*." Wagner was sympathetic towards her frustration but wondered if that "one fine play" continued to elude her because of a more profound tension between form and vision in her work that she had failed as yet to resolve adequately in her mature drama:

I won't presume to say what's eluded you in your writing but do want to make the observation that you always seem to want to write comedies, to 'escape into farce' as you've said yourself, whereas many of your most successful plays, *Still Stands the House*, *Pasque Flower*, *Dark Harvest*, *Lament for Harmonica*, *The Rainmaker*, etc. are serious dramas dealing with the darker more fundamental things in life. You have had tragedies in your own life and have touched on the death of your two brothers in *Mirage*. It may be painful but conceivably that source of suffering could become a creative and liberating source as well if you can find the right subject matter to clothe it in. (22 October 1980)

Wagner's observation must have had at least some disconcerting echoes to Ringwood of an earlier phase of criticism that had viewed *House* as her "one fine play"—all the more so given Anthony's own recent private confession to the author that *The Lodge*, at least on first reading, "seemed so diffuse and lacking in the miraculous power of e.g. *Still Stands the House*" (16 January 1979). In truth, neither editor was equating the "real" Ringwood with the young artist of forty years ago, but both seemed uncertain as to where that younger self still resided in the older artist's self and writing. Just as much to the point, Ringwood seemed uncertain as well. Significantly, the years between 1974 and 1979 when she "laboured and wrestled" with *The Lodge* were also the ones when she "laboured and wrestled" most intensely and personally in her other writings about the intimate relationship between self and art as she understood it in late maturity.

She agreed with Wagner that she tended to gravitate more towards comedy than drama, but denied that it was necessarily because of a "general optimistic outlook on life" (19 August 1974). As suggested in other writings, Ringwood's decision to write *The Lodge* as a comedy may have been a sign of her own feeling, with the passing of the years, that art was ultimately more about taking the pain of life away than about expressing the pain that existed. In her talk "The Sense of Place" she comments, "In a way it seems that artistic experience is often a search for somewhere where it doesn't hurt so much."

Marriage and children, she was to write in other letters, were not the only profound changes that marked a watershed between the young artist and the older one. In contrast to her simpler childhood years on the prairies and the aspiring years of the 1930s, she had found the 1940s a time of loneliness, violent death, and deep personal grief and loss:

I was lonely with Barney away [at war] and I was also frightened of the responsibility of caring for two children both small and inclined to tonsillitis. Barney got home a few times the first year he was in the Army and then was Overseas for two years. My two eldest brothers were in the Air Force and both were killed in action while Barney was overseas. My youngest brother [...] went to High School one year and then enlisted in the Air Force and went to Toronto. Both of us took the loss of our two brothers very hard and I think my youngest brother Bob never got over his grief entirely, and from that time suffered severe depressions which later resulted in his death. (Letter to Wagner, 29 January 1979)

Had the violence and death ultimately resulted in a better political order or affirmed some higher human, social, or philosophical truth at work in the world, it might have been easier to accept these losses as a necessary sacrifice to a greater good. However, the advent of the Cold War had simply brought more disillusionment:

When the United Nations first met in San Francisco I listened to the opening and I walked to the river and I swore that the only memorial I could make for George and Blaine was to serve the new United Nations in any way I could. So many of us felt we would never again see war or genocide because we would have a workable ombudsman in the United Nations. When within five years we were in the atmosphere of the Cold War—the suspicions, the lists, the fear, the realignments and the anger—I found it almost impossible to understand. How did we get there? (29 January 1979)

Why did she not continue to write tragedy? At least in part her letters suggest because the tragic vision presupposes a belief in a rational, benign universe where death and violence ultimately have meaning. In her case, the younger “poet” that had been capable of writing “like a man” and affirming the heroic “exaltation” of man struggling “against a hostile world” in which he “struggles, suffers and fails” but “is ennobled by his struggle, never debased, and though dejected and in despair never utterly destroyed” (Brodersen) was gone. That self too had “died”—a war casualty of a kind.

One wonders if the same experience did not also affect Ringwood’s willingness to write in a more overtly feminist fashion, even when, as she expresses it in her letters to Anthony, she became aware of the gap between the rhetoric of equality and the actual practice of it in her time. When “the high adventure, the leaving of home, the taking to the open road, the rebellion against the bonds that crippled in the name of love, the travelling alone, the achievement of economic dependency” led men to these horrifying ends, could one wholly trust these “prerogatives of men” to take women to a better place?

In any case, the type of plays had changed, because she had changed:

...[Y]ou [Wagner] are correct when you say plays [sic] lack strong dramatic conflict often. I find it hard to escape clichés and [sic] melodramatic forced quality when dealing with violence, hate, terror. [...] Also I must face the fact that it is hard for me to deal with violence. I feel sick literally when I am faced with the facts of the pogroms, child battering, the results of Hiroshima, the uselessness and savagery of wars. (19 August 1974)

One response to the overwhelming reality of human evil and violence beyond individual comprehension or healing was to retreat into an idyllic semi-mythic world of the past, “symphonic,” full of “music, color, bigness,” in which the elements of celebration considerably lightened the darker, sadder, or more menacing undercurrents in the play. This was particularly true of the plays of the Alberta Folklore Project: “[W]ith my personal life so torn by the war [...] it was a relief to write plays about Alberta’s past” (Wagner 29 January 1979).

The other response was to retreat into an idyllic, comedic version of the present in which the terrors of the contemporary world, leavened with poetry and humour, could be transformed into something more life-affirming and celebratory. In *The Lodge* Jasmine’s championing of Quentin and his constructive work in the Third World may have been an expression of Ringwood’s own belief that the rise of a new generation always presents the possibilities of new regeneration for the world and that “even when I am most aware that human beings are rapacious and greedy animals, I also think of those ‘new lamps for old’ people who changed slightly the course of development and changed it usually for what seems better to me” (To Wagner 19 August 1974).

However, Quentin’s viability as a “solution,” let alone a character, is considerably weakened by his complete physical absence from the play and its action. The constraints of realism may work against his easily appearing at the family reunion. Still, one wonders if his absence is not also a sign of Ringwood’s inability to realize in physical form and action an abstraction she could not really believe in herself by that point. Moreover, there appears to be a growing and jarring disjunction between, on the one hand, the optimistic world of opening personal, educational, and cultural vistas and renewed natural powers presented in *The Lodge* and, on the other hand, Ringwood’s perception, at least in her later correspondence, of an outer world collapsing ever further into demonic violence and chaos beyond human comprehension or remedy. On 31 October 1983, she wrote to George Ryga:

For myself I am shaken to the core at the brutality and senseless killing that is going on across the earth. One takes comfort from the peace marches but I doubt there is time to turn around and teach other values to our children who from babyhood have been indoctrinated with war games, violence, disrespect for life. And we are fed lies. A society with Superfat as a god and Greed as a religion.

Taking stock of the older self that wrote *The Lodge*, Ringwood seemed to suggest that while the play was a serious enough expression of the continuing hope and desire of her rational being for a sane, constructive world order, the artist lacked the kind of multiplicity of selves in her own life experience to “know” and write convincingly about those larger, fundamental issues for others in any brutally direct or realistic fashion. More than that, it hurt far too much to encompass, absorb, and render imaginatively in fictional form the massive human pain of a world that was too often neither sane nor constructive.

Yet if the aesthetic form could not adequately express and control what the artist perceived as the growing darkness and chaos of the outer world, surely the form, properly utilized, could at least allow the mature artist to safely re-construct, control, and purge the forces of darkness and chaos as experienced within his or her own psychic space. As Wagner implied, there were other modes besides tragedy or folk tragedy in which one could deal with the “darker more fundamental things in life” in a serious fashion. Could not that inner landscape as touched by personal tragedy, that internal “source of suffering,” be ultimately transformed into “a creative and liberating source” provided one worked through the pain of it properly and it was clothed in “the right subject matter”?

Again, in earlier letters to Wagner, Ringwood had expressed some discomfort with the idea. Rationally knowing and accepting that many “ugly aspects of life” existed was different from the knowledge gained by actually experiencing “the terrible in some of its forms” (19 August 1974). On one level, Ringwood appears to have simply meant that her relatively sheltered life as both a woman and human being had left her inadequately prepared to write well about some aspects of “the terrible” abroad in the world. Yet she also appeared to be concerned about internally experiencing “the terrible in some of its forms” and then having to live with the changes to the self that that act of experiencing forced if she was not careful with how she aesthetically regulated the room of the mind. Not all threats to the safety and integrity of the inner space that allowed the artist to exist and function came from the outside. There were forms of darkness that could also nibble away and devour the artist-controlled world of ecstasy, vision, and transcendence from the inside. These too could render the room of the mind a complex, uncertain place that could not be wholly controlled by either the artist or the aesthetic form:

I do shrink somehow from probing or revealing the deeper wellsprings of being. A kind of decorum, convention, that I don't always like but usually adhere to, both in writing and in talking about myself writing. This may be why too I keep going back to comedy—is it true that one is more remote, removed from one's material in comedy. Or perhaps can disguise an attitude, express it in comic terms without going far out above the black pit. I don't know. Some day I'll let you read the new play but not yet. (23 June 1974)

Significantly, again, *The Lodge* was the “new play” that Ringwood was wrestling with even as she was struggling to come to terms with her sense of there being an odd disjunction between her art and “the deeper wellsprings of being.” Equally significantly, it was a work being written at a time when both Ringwood and her editors were engaged in writing projects that tacitly acknowledged that any meaningful exploration of the relationship between Ringwood's life and art had to involve a comprehensive examination of the entire body of her life and art up to that point. There was indisputably a biological continuum linking Ringwood's youngest to her oldest self as different phases of the same human being. Similarly, a body of sympathetic scholars was busy over the 1970s establishing a biographical continuum linking her earliest to her most recent work as the product of the same artist. It remained to Ringwood to decide if there existed a deeper psychic, spiritual, or intellectual continuum that united all those various phases of being and doing into an integrated portrait of herself as both an artist and a human being in late maturity. Was there? Ringwood, at least in 1974, frankly confessed, “I don't know”; and if the “new play” had any answers, it was not yet ready for outside eyes.

In both *The Lodge* and other personal and semi-autobiographic writing over the late 1970s and early 1980s Ringwood actually did put considerable time and work into trying to understand the nature of whatever deeper human continuum did exist between her divergent personal and artistic selves. Her clearest explanation of what she meant by “the black pit” appears in “Scenes from a Country Life,” a collection of unpublished pieces that she describes as “a body of personal myth” based on her “memories of childhood in a small prairie town,” as written in the late 1970s. In its form both as a collection of “Short short stories and episodes about a child in the country. 13 scenes” and a public lecture also entitled “Scenes from a Country Life” given to Canadian Theatre Today Conference at University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 11 October 1981, Ringwood draws an explicit connection between

the character “Ludmilla” and her child self as remembered and re-experienced reflectively by her adult self in old age.

Labelling the collection of episodes a “memoir” she explains:

In recalling memories of a childhood in a small prairie town, I find myself besieged, not with facts, but feelings, images, half sentences, cries, whispers. Sifting through memories for truth of those long-gone years is puzzling, bewildering, because I can only find what seems to be true for me. The odysseys of youth come to be a body of personal myth as the years pass by. And somehow it has been easier to recall the heart of girlhood experience by looking back as if it happened to someone else ... and so the child I was becomes Ludmilla or Sylvia or Jane and through them I live again my remembrance of things past. (“Appetite” 1)

In the segment “An Appetite for Life,” Ringwood dates her birth as a consciously knowing creative entity back to her initial experiences as a seven or eight year-old child first trying to comprehend the infinity and openness of her prairie environment. Far from feeling her personal boundaries threatened or diminished by the vast alien “otherness” surrounding her, she found her psychic boundaries empathetically expanding to encompass and accommodate the world and all within it. It was then that she first experienced what she was to call the “familiar and voracious need to know everybody on earth, know them in all their infinite diversity” (7), a hunger she was still capable of feeling as a woman and artist some sixty years later:

Ludmilla, now old herself, pretended not to recall that voracious cry of herself at seven or eight years old. Actually, she didn’t need to recall it. The hunger had gnawed at her from time to time for sixty years.

She had hungered and thirsted to know everybody on earth, take them into herself, dissect them and make them her own [...] to take them apart like clocks and put them together whole. In moments of elation she wanted to spread her arms out, feeling she could embrace them all. [...]

And behind the living were the Others ... those who came before ... behind the living were The Shades. [...] This appetite for people would not be appeased, Ludmilla thought, even if she came to know everyone on the earth. Behind them loomed the mighty army of The Shades. (1-2)

It was not long, however, before even the child began to be aware that the realm of infinite diversity held forms of hunger, nihilism,

and obsession that could possess and dissect human beings without any regard for putting them back “together whole” afterwards. As Ringwood recalled, a violent crime and the execution of the three murderers (including a woman) ended “Ludmilla’s” initial state of innocence and propelled her, at least psychically, into the darker, more troubled realm of experience:

Perhaps it was with the execution of the three Italians that young Ludmilla first glimpsed levels of darkness that lay beneath the flat, sunlit life around her. From this time on Ludmilla realized that there were unknown caverns, a deep abyss of terror, acts of anger, passion, madness that could tremble the frame, chill the bone, trouble sleep. (7)

How, then, did one reconcile the voracious hunger to know and embrace “all” with the realization that doing so necessarily meant taking “into herself” and “making [...] her own” much that was toxic as well as life-giving in nature? Confronted with the reality that life and the self contained shadows and shades of bleaker kinds, Ringwood’s younger self accepts the fact that to be whole, and to really know “everybody on earth”—including the self—in all “their infinite diversity” means also embracing the “levels of darkness [...] unknown caverns [...] deep abyss of terror”—in short, “the black pit”—as well as the “sunlit life” above it: “These too must be taken in, surrounded. Some how, some time in her life she must come to terms with these black holes that swallowed up the light” (7). It is with this recognition that the girl Ludmilla essentially begins her transformation into the artist as a young woman.

In Ringwood’s mind, at least, a similar struggle to balance the opposing forces of light and dark in some vision of wholeness was one of the threads of commonality which linked the young writer of *Still Stands the House* to both her child and her older self. An earlier school of dominantly male criticism had discussed both *House* and its author largely in terms of a folk play tradition validating the heroism of a strongly realized individual against the elemental forces of Nature. Ringwood’s own critical writing about the play during the 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, tended to stress its more psychic, metaphysical aspects instead. In addition to her 1979 letter to Laura Moonulen, in which she describes *House* as a play featuring “the forces of stagnation and death as against those of change and growth and light,” she also wrote a 1978 “Foreword” to the play in which she explained that “Ruth and Hester represent a life and death struggle between the forces that celebrate life and those that negate it” (273).



Significantly, Gowan, who was to see so much of herself and Ringwood in *The Lodge*, also suggested to Geraldine Anthony in the 1970s that she thought that *House*, at least as she understood it herself in later years, was an oddly personal play that revealed more about both playwrights as women and artists than many people realized. While she didn't write "Hester" into existence, Gowan frankly admitted to Geraldine Anthony in a letter of 9 June 1976 that "I have played Hester [of *Still Stands the House*] several times." The rage over the prospect of being dependent and powerless, the sense of grievance with an unfair world, the iron will, and the ability to take quick decisive action to remedy an intolerable situation were all traits that the older Gowan recognized as her own as well. They were also distinguishing traits of many of her own women characters. However, even while acknowledging that her affinity to the character meant, on some level, acknowledging a similar potential in herself to become one of "these black holes" that swallow "up the light," Gowan distanced herself firmly from Hester's madness, dismissing her "twisted nature" as part of the human price paid for homesteading the land. Similarly, Gowan's characters, as guided by the formidable intellect and strong socialist principles of their creator, tend to turn their rage, passion, and energy outwards to the world and to take decisive personal action to change a rigid, unjust, "mad" social order into a saner, more humane place for women and the marginalized to live. If Gowan recognized the potential within herself and her own characters to become "Hester," she could also recognize the potential of even a "Hester" to become a Gowan or Gowan-type character if placed in a different situation and allowed to make different choices guided by a more enlightened sense of rationality and principle. In that respect, the distance between "Hester," whom Gowan actually realized on stage, and "Jasmine," whom she wished she had played, may not have been so great, in Gowan's mind at least. To the extent that Jasmine affirms her own internal beauty and power by resisting powerlessness, dependence, and confinement even in older age and continues to dedicate her talents and resources to the services of a greater social and human good, her choices were very similar to ones that Gowan and Gowan's characters would have made as well. Still in the same 17 July 1983 letter to Ringwood, Gowan also notes that she thought that there were other elements of the character—Jasmine's "poetic quality" and "deep involvement with the roots of the earth," especially as expressed in the scenes by the Spring—that were distinctively Ringwood. Just as importantly, she regarded them as defining features of "Ruth" as well. In the same 1976 letter to Anthony,

Gowan made an explicit connection between Ringwood and the “Ruth” character in suggesting that she perceived her old friend as being “Ruth”—a kind of Persephone/Demeter figure—even in real life:

Ruth is practically Gwen herself ... gentle but sturdy, the embodiment of the Life sustaining force. In Bruce’s lines about the land (fine poetry, really) she expresses her own deep love for that prairie country. [...] Love, to my mind, is the keynote of all Gwen’s work ... Agape, the unselfish, self-giving love.

Yet by Ringwood’s own admission, in 1978, the deeply personal initial image from which the rest of *House* grew was not a vision of a fertile, loving Ruth imposing order on a malignant world, but of Hester as an all-consuming force of stagnation and death:

The woman was alone. She was rocking a doll. Outside the wind lifted and swirled snow around the house, a wind that moaned and howled like some demented Fury. This visual image was the germ of the story that became *Still Stands the House*. The doll was not used, but Hester, the chair, the house, and the blizzard outside comprise the final scene of the tragedy. (Foreword)

In the world of the play, Ruth’s youthful light and fertility, like that of the murder victim in “Appetite,” are extinguished by an act “of anger, passion, madness” rising out of the “deep abyss of terror.” However, in 1938 Ringwood might still have believed in the power of the artistic imagination to make whole again that which had been consumed or dissected, or to guide the artist, and those journeying with her, through “the levels of darkness” in “the unknown caverns” without losing the ability to return at will to “the sunlit life” above.

The faith of her younger selves in the ability of the artist to create a holistic psychic world in which “all” could be “taken in” and “surrounded” and accepted for the sake of complete knowing appears to have been severely shaken by the crisis years of the 1940s and 1950s, when Ringwood was personally experiencing all too much of the potential of “the black holes” in all their forms to completely swallow “up the light.” Is it possible that there were no more *Houses* written at least in part because Ringwood began to realize that there were deeper personal dimensions to the fictional life and death struggle between Ruth and Hester—and that it might not be possible to safely accommodate all of her selves in

their “infinite diversity” in the same “house” or “room of the mind.”

By the 1970s, the artist in later years was still capable of remembering and experiencing the restless, voracious hunger of her younger selves to know all and to seek a wholeness in life and art that encompassed the darkness of the caverns as well as well-lit plains. Yet it was a hunger now tempered by the knowledge that there were some forms of descent into “the black pit” from which neither the artist nor the human being might be able to return “together whole.” Again, *The Lodge* was the work in which Ringwood struggled the hardest to define the complex nature of “the black pit,” especially as it related to the relationship between her divergent selves as artist and human being. It was also to remain one of the few semi-autobiographical pieces of writing from that period that Ringwood herself judged to be finished enough in conception and execution to be publicly performed and published.

Even so, it is a play that remains haunted by issues raised by the writer herself in 1974. The advantage of comedy, according to Ringwood, is that it allows one to deal with one’s material “on comic terms without going far out above the black pit.” Yet, in evading the pit, does one still ultimately avoid “probing or revealing the deeper wellsprings of being”? As previously noted, in *The Lodge* Shelley claims that she fled Robin and their idyllic artistic life abroad because of her fear that a life spent in perpetual company with her Muse would lead her into a life of aimlessness, self-indulgence, and stasis, inconsistent with the celebratory forces of life in the play. One suspects that the hidden terror that neither Jasmine nor Shelley directly acknowledge during their dialogue by the Spring is that the other side of the artist’s controlled aesthetic world of ecstasy, vision, and transcendence rising from the creative depths is the “black pit” or “abyss” of madness which can brutally reshape “the sunlit life” into its own grotesque image before isolating and devouring its creator.

In the “sunlit life” of the upper world of the play, Allan’s potential to develop into the “demon lover” is acknowledged, confronted, and dispelled. By contrast, even during their intimate moment by the Springs, neither artist really touches on Robin’s potential, in a darker manifestation, to transform himself from the gentle, affectionate lover frolicking in the Mediterranean sun to a dark abductor bursting up from the bowels of the earth to drag the artist down to an Underworld of perpetual cold, loneliness, and pain from which there may be no returning.

Similarly, while Shelley’s impulse to abort Allan’s flesh-and-blood child seems to be diffused even in the act of confessing the desire to Jasmine, neither manifestation of the artist directly

addresses the paradoxical nature of that decision in favor of “life” insofar as it affects the survival of Shelley’s other “children”—light and dark—as conceived with her Muse. Ideally, the artistic consciousness encompasses both the upper world and the abyss and all within it. Yet for the artist to live successfully as a creature of the upper world it would appear, to judge from Shelley’s diminished artistic productivity, that certain ruthless “abortions” of the mind and imagination are required to ensure human life or survival of another kind. Ultimately, the creative ability to conceive of multiple selves composed of both light and dark has to be balanced against the need for a million small “murders” of the self if one is to retain sufficient sanity, balance, and serenity in one’s “room of the mind” to become a variety of useful selves in the world.

When Shelley confesses that her relationship with Robin left her feeling “guilty,” one suspects that “Guilt enters into it” indeed on a far deeper, darker, and more complex level than the “sunlit” realistic surface of the play suggests. If there is a “sin against life” involved in nurturing one’s fictional characters at the expense of the real people in one’s life, is there not another one committed in the diminution of the human being and artist involved in strangling the full multiplicity of selves in their “infinite variety” so one can function in real life?

Clearly Ringwood wrestled painfully and conscientiously with both *The Lodge* and the larger personal, artistic, and social issues shaping it over the years between 1974-1979. Yet the results, even in her own estimation, were disappointing. The size of the cast, the “diffusiveness” of its issues, the tension between its poetic vision and realistic style may have all contributed to the play’s difficulties. Still in and of themselves these factors were likely not responsible for its “failure.” Nor can the play’s flaws be attributed too simplistically to Ringwood’s decision to write it as a comedy. There is much to be said for her conviction that if the purpose of art is to create a place where it doesn’t hurt so much, then comedy was an appropriate mode of expression since it allowed one the necessary distance to work safely with “the black pit” without falling into it. Perhaps the real problem was that the pain and guilt associated with “the black pit” remained too deep, complex, and unresolved in nature to be adequately expressed, accounted for, or resolved within the bright, generous, life-affirming upper world of the play. In short, despite its attempts to do so, *The Lodge* still did not deal adequately with the “levels of darkness that lay beneath the flat, sunlit life around her.”

Nonetheless, Ringwood still had hopes that that “one fine play” was somewhere deep inside her, waiting to be born. On 11 September 1981 she wrote to Geraldine Anthony, mentioning her completion of *The Furies* and the start of what she hoped would be another major work:

In the back of my mind *Prisoners of War* is stirring, giving occasional faint kicks like a child in the womb ... please god I have a sound idea and concept in my mind and not a still birth.

After *Prisoners of War* perhaps will be the time to explore aging and death and the fear and the imminence and inevitability of death and the decline of one’s physical and often one’s mental abilities. And the capability of some spirits to override these shadowy harrying night-hunters and achieve some lasting creativity or serenity or acceptance or vision.

Her one-act comedy *The Garage Sale* (1981) had already touched on the subject of aging with gentle, ironic whimsy, but if the “long play” intended to deal with “the fear and the imminence and inevitability of death and the decline of one’s physical and often one’s mental abilities” was not *The Lodge*, flawed though it was, it was not to be at all. *Prisoners of War* was never completed and the play after it never begun.

By 1982 a biological clock of a different kind had started to tick away the moments and regulate the rhythms of Ringwood’s life. With the onset of cancer some of the darker issues raised in *The Lodge* about the imminence and inevitability of death—the final descent to the Underworld—unexpectedly took on a new urgency in her life as she began to deal with the imminent pain of a deeper and more fundamental dissolution and disposal of the self.

In the closing moments of the first scene of *The Lodge* Jasmine reveals that she went through a kind of death experience the previous spring that made her anxious to see her family again. She reveals that a disastrous fire has destroyed everything she once had. Only her absence at Banff, painting once more, had prevented the fire from literally being a funeral pyre as well. Eardley, with typical tact and sensitivity, comments, “Too bad you weren’t there when the fire broke out” (458). While Jasmine gently chides him, “I feel lucky” (458), her sense is that her entire self and personal history have been consumed and destroyed in the blaze. Is one ultimately anything more, she asks, than the fragmented self, “a piece of broken china—the pieces all there but not together,” the sum of “the odds and ends and scraps and pieces of a life time”?:

I spent years tidying things for posterity, Alice. When the fire came it tidied the whole thing up. [...] Jars of fruit. Scraps of a patchwork quilt. Edward's diary. Forty-two sketch books and all my paintings. And newspaper clippings about the Roosevelts, and Hiroshima and Belsen and the first meeting of the United Nations. King Edward's abdication. Gandhi's salt march. Nehru's death [...] I went back and saw the place gutted, finished—I felt as if I'd been wiped out too. Nothing left, but skin stretched over old bones, and a skull, five dull senses—

However, she confesses that, in the end, the loss has led her to a moment of apotheosis:

When your father was killed, Robin, and again when Edward died, I thought maybe I wanted to die too. I didn't feel that way about the fire ... but I did feel lost. Without my things. Things can be like a cocoon around you. Make you feel safe. Then all of a sudden I realized that I'm free ... free to find a new shape, or to fill up the one I'm supposed to have. I don't have to live in my things any more. I can just live. (458)

In Jasmine's case "just liv[ing]" means dedicating herself fully, for whatever time she has left, to the pursuit of art and the world of light, creativity, humanity, colour, and imagination it has always evoked for her at its best.

In some ways, it was a vision eerily prophetic of decisions Ringwood was to make in her final years as both the writing and the "room of the mind" that produced it began to be consumed by the pain of the illness, leading to a "fragmentation" of a different and more troubling kind. On 4 November 1982 she wrote to Ryga that

*Prisoners of War* is an amorphous mass of fragments, images, despair and cynicism, lost promises or broken intermittent hope and I'm at last trying to plough through it in some kind of form. The material is very close to my own bone, sinew, blood and consciousness, nightmares, dreams. I hope it works.

However, by the fall of 1983 she was confessing to Denyse Lynde (19 November 1983) that while she still hoped to finish the play, "I seem to be very lazy about writing these days. I enjoy sketching in pastels or dabbling with paint a lot more." She commented to Wagner as well that she was sketching more than writing now because she found it "very therapeutic—trying to get an impression of all this autumn splendour":

I have been sketching a lot with pastels because the fall colour this year has been unusually beautiful—everywhere I look I see things crying out to be painted or sketched. [...] If I am going to do any writing I will have to discipline myself to do it first—rather than expending the energy on the painting. (11 Oct 1983)

Prophetically, Jasmine's own wish by the mystical waters of the Soda Spring amidst the fire of Indian summer was: "I wish not to be helpless. I wish to die before I'm helpless. [...] Please God let me go on painting" (Lodge 462-463). On 3 October 1983, Ringwood wrote to George Ryga:

I have done no writing at all. A lot of pastel sketches of the fall colour which was riotous and exultant this year. All gone now except for low growing things. [...] I am told that further chemotherapy for me (I've had none since early in the year) would probably not do me any good so I'm just going along from day to day. [...] I haven't done any writing though I keep hoping to finish up a few things that I started. ... Always put it off until tomorrow. Sketching is easier—you see your results, you are sensuously and physically involved, and you can finish a pastel sketch in two hours. For good or ill—you've lost yourself in contemplation of form and colour and something outside yourself.

She wrote again on 1 May 1984: "Dear Friends, I still sketch flowers and the outdoor scene from time to time and I find I can fight pain and boredom by focusing my attention on something outside myself."

On 24 May 1984 Gwen Pharis Ringwood died of cancer at the age of seventy-four.



"In a way it seems that artistic experience is often a search for somewhere where it doesn't hurt so much[, where one can] achieve some lasting creativity or serenity or acceptance or vision [to] override these shadowy harrying night-hunters."

In *The Lodge* Shelley reluctantly accepts Jasmine's need to tidy up the ends and fragments of her old life and move on so that everyone else is free to disperse and get on with their lives. Yet she insists that there is still one important end to tie, one fragment to

complete, one final ceremony to pass through at this last of all birthdays before the communal celebration is complete. Contemplating the approach of her first “birth day”—the day she will first give birth to a child—Shelley had initially resisted participating in the wishing ritual at the Spring because “you can’t go around making wishes if you don’t even know what you want...if you don’t even know who you are”(464). Now, however, she tells her older counterpart it is the proper time for the ceremony of wishes. Significantly, Jasmine agrees.

In a late letter to Enid Rutland (circa 1981), Ringwood wrote, “For each of us it is a separate unique experience just to live and sometimes I think we are islands with only flickering torches to signal to each other.” The final image of the play focuses on the two women artists, one already bearing the next generation, about to ignite the “flickering torches” of the birthday cake in an ambiguous image of life, death, and hope.

That we come into the world at all with our voracious wishing to “know everybody on earth [...] in all their infinite diversity” is cause enough for the celebration of a life. That we leave it again, knowing the futility of such wishing in the face of our own inevitable isolation from the world and each other—knowing the fragmentation and multiple deaths of the self involved in simply being and becoming—is cause enough for the mourning of a life. The artist, in both her younger and older manifestation, pauses to catch the absurdity and irony of that moment of recognition, then moves beyond it to the final action of the play:

SHELLEY. [...] It’s ... It’s ... like a ceremony, Grandma.

JASMINE. Of course. A ceremony.

SHELLEY. (lighting the candles) When they’re all lighted, you make a wish and then you blow them out. (In a small voice) Happy birthday, Grandma.

JASMINE. I wish ... I wish.... (She blows all the candles out. Curtain) (488)

It is perhaps in the suggestion that there is a value in knowing the ultimate absurdity of being and doing, and still lighting the candles anyway—of breaking down what one can of the inner and outer darkness, isolation, and fragmentation of human existence through the signaling of one’s torches, in life and in art—for as long as one can before the flame gutters and one passes into darkness again, that *The Lodge*, in its final moments at least, genuinely does become a place where “it doesn’t hurt so much.” ❁





**Gwen Pharis Ringwood, 1934**

“Woman is a flower that breathes its perfume in the shade only.” Lamennais  
ACC No 93-82. University of Alberta Archives.  
from *Evergreen and Gold Yearbook*, 1934, p. 61



**Gwen Pharis Ringwood, 1978**

Photo by Patrick Ringwood.

## NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Gary Gowan and Patrick Ringwood for giving me permission to quote from the letters used in this article. I would also like to thank Archives and Special Collections at both the University of Alberta and University of Calgary for their help in obtaining the photographs of Ringwood.
- 2 Ringwood frequently used ellipsis in both her creative writing and letters to indicate a pause or “beat” in speech or thought. (So did a number of her correspondents, like Elsie Park Gowan). In some cases, the occasional presence of a double rather than triple period in Ringwood’s letters made it unclear whether she had accidentally added another period at the end of a sentence, or failed to complete an intended ellipsis. In the few cases where this has occurred, I have tended to render the punctuation, based on context, as an ellipsis; but even in these rare cases, there is no actual gap in the written text of the letter, nor did Ringwood intend one. My own ellipses as an editor/writer are indicated by square brackets. Beyond that, any ellipses contained in the quotations should be read as the author’s own original punctuation.
- 3 Ringwood’s preoccupation with writing that “one fine play” surfaces in other of her correspondence. In a letter written to her brother, Robert Pharis, in the early 1960s, she notes, “I am not sure that I am a playwright by nature? [sic] But I’d give much to write one fine play. I’d rather write a good play I think than a good novel, book of short stories, t.v. script, radio script or autobiography.”
- 4 While Rutland notes that the play won third place in Smile Theatre Competition (585), its 1977 production by the West Vancouver Little

Theatre appears to have been the only one on record, and its première seems to have received little to no critical attention. Geraldine Anthony's analysis of the play in her book *Gwen Pharis Ringwood* probably remains the most comprehensive and sensitive literary study of the play published to date. Anthony compares it in style and theme to the work of Lorca, Chekhov, Hellman and Tennessee Williams. Nonetheless, even Anthony expressed some concerns about its "diffuse" nature after an initial reading (16 January 1979).

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