

*Donald Stephens*

## LILACS OUT OF THE MOSAIC LAND: ASPECTS OF THE SACRIFICIAL THEME IN CANADIAN FICTION

CANADA IS THE MOSAIC LAND, unlike the American melting pot; it is the modern non-denominational Promised Land, the stepmother who has taken to her bosom not only the sons of Abraham but also all the prodigal sons of the world. The sons and grandsons of these prodigal sons have assimilated the combined cultural heritage of their forefathers and evolved an archetypal language, which is, at the same time, Canadian and universal. Typically, Canadian writers are strongly oriented toward their various religious backgrounds, a by-product of early Calvinism, and they usually fall into the three main categories of Judaic, Protestant, or Roman Catholic. Despite these initial differences, most share a common vocabulary of conventional archetypes which transcend the superficial boundaries of ethnic distinction. The Canadian writer is usually concerned with the abstract, and generally optimistic, idea. In this area of the abstract, Jew, Gentile, and Catholic converse freely of the most elemental motivations for the existence of man.

An element, peculiar to all primitive and sophisticated cultures, is the ritual of sacrifice, with its inherent hopes for the appeasement of the gods and, more important, for the renewal of life. Usually the ceremony represents the expiation of evil through the sacrifice of one for the sin of the many, as in the case of Christianity. In ritual, sacrifice is the simultaneous presence of life and death, and it is only through death that life is fully experienced, or even made possible. This is the notion of Ernest Hemingway, where truth is approached in *Nada*, the land of the living dead. For Dylan Thomas and T. S. Eliot, life is a corollary of symbolic death or sacrifice, an aberration of the irrevocable cycle of birth, copulation, and death. Time holds man green and dying in chains which can only be broken by the voluntary renunciation of our most precious gift—life. This is the cry of many Canadian novelists, particularly of MacLennan in *The Watch That Ends the Night*, and of Malcolm Lowry in his "Forest Path to the Spring".

It is to be expected that a literature lacking in historical antecedent

would draw upon the symbolic vocabulary of older cultures. Canadian writing has been profoundly affected by the contemporary literary idiom of other countries, especially that which is universal in context. The Canadian writer has pursued the universal so that he will not be accused of being provincial; his very pursuit often makes him parochial. Because Canada is a young country, the symbols effected by Canadian writers are generally optimistic, and the themes are often those of beginning, and the connotations of rebirth and renewal. Often the association is to a renewal myth, often that of the Phoenix reborn out of burning ashes. In the symbolic novel in Canada, then, the connotative significance of death is the renewal of life rather than an assertion of decadence.

The novel in Canada, in the early part of the twentieth century, was for the most part an imitation of the novel in other parts of the world. Canadian writers, knowing that they were writing in opposition with others writing in the English language, borrowed themes and ideas, and often were twenty to thirty years behind the original impetus. The Canadian novel had a much longer period of probation before it achieved its final artistic fullness with *As For Me and My House* in 1941, where Sinclair Ross was able to combine many of the earlier trends: the use of natural setting, the technical skill in description, the serious interest in the makeup of society. He was able to add a psychological insight into human beings, and a central unifying artistic concept and drive, and thus produce what is probably Canada's first great novel. It is not certain that he has yet been surpassed.

In *As For Me and My House*, Sinclair Ross created a mood of surrealist tensions. Every sensory detail is intensified to the exaggerated pitch of electronic music. The Bentleys, whose life is a grotesque pose, are slowly reduced to a "Wasteland" condition in which there is no apparent hope, aside from the futile wish for a son to help them transcend the limitation of their hypocritical existence. They are looking constantly for beginnings: Philip must constantly paint a new picture, but they are always like the old ones; Mrs. Bentley must try her hand at a new garden in the spring, but as in all her other gardens, drought and wind blow the seeds away. Mrs. Bentley is a kind of reverse earth mother, whose sterile and empty womb is a reflection of her mental and spiritual condition; but she has the will to win. For the woman who longs for a child, there is no release from the gradual drip, drip of daily living. This wish for a son is not fulfilled until Philip ironically provides her with the issue of his seduction through the sacrifice of the innocent, Judith. The birth of the son of Judith is a life-and-death struggle in which both are

triumphant. The sacrifice of her life gives birth to a new generation and is symbolic of a break with the past. The child ends the period of infertility, and has a cathartic effect, releasing the tensions of an agonizing marital relationship. The Bentleys have their child, they will move to the university town and start life anew in a bookshop and music store rather than repeat attempts to live in outmoded manses in towns like the one they left, towns of oblivion. Judith becomes the archetypal heroine, often more of an idea than a substance. Death gives her a reality which she never had in life. The cyclical and seasonal pattern of the novel relates Judith to pagan ritual and to the Christian ethic. Her renunciation of life is Christ-like and voluntary.

The diction and phraseology of *As For Me and My House* is Biblical, and the allusion reaches even farther. Judith is an echo of the Biblical Judith, an Old Testament heroine who saved her town by offering herself to the Babylonian general who was besieging it, cutting off his head, and thus rescuing the Jews from tyranny. Similarly, Ross's character becomes the heroine for the Bentleys, for the whole setting of the novel with its false fronts and narrow hypocrisy, by offering herself for their salvation. Sexual themes are linked to the martyrdom of both women, emphasizing the regenerative aspect of their action and the inseparability of life and death.

The modern Canadian novelist, the modern abstract philosopher, takes the most meaningful Christian message from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. Some portions are expressive of cynicism found in much contemporary literature; "all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." The most significant symbol in the Book of Ecclesiastes is the circle, the medieval symbol of life. In a circular existence, life and death are superimposed on an unbreakable chain: "The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises." W. O. Mitchell borrows the God-wind and circular imagery of Ecclesiastes for his novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a record of the Christian revelation, or the meaning of death, to a young boy on the prairie.

The boy, Brian, experiences a series of minor epiphanies, growing circles of awareness which echo the circular pattern of his own life and the life on the prairie. The seasons whirl on one another in the prairie landscape; they teach a lesson of life to the boy. It is only through the painful revelation of death that Brian becomes truly acquainted with life. The deaths in the novel do not have the cathartic poignancy of that of Judith in *As For Me and My House*, but in total they assume the greater significance of the sacrifice essential to life.

The death of Brian's dog, and its burial in the prairie, precede the period

of fertility and regeneration foreseen by Uncle Sean. The ritual burial of his pet is Brian's first real experience with God, the God whom he asks about earlier in the novel, and who takes the shape of the Young Ben, the furtive and poor boy who seems to wander the prairie, who is part of that landscape. Through his relationship with the Young Ben, Brian learns tolerance and rejects the hypocrisy and inhumanity which finally motivates the suicide of old Wong, the sacrificial lamb of a community tending to be corrupt. The memory of his bravery ("The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh") and of the unkindness which precipitated his irrevocable act of protest, helps to develop a greater humanity on the part of Brian, and it may be hoped, of the younger generation. Through the earlier experience of the death of his father, Brian comes to accept the death-wish of his grandmother as a desire to be closer to God; hence the open window which she insists upon having in her death-room, and her unconscious wish to release the boy from the corrupted restraining influences of the past. Once he is free, Brian will emerge untarnished in a world he can help to create.

One of the directions in which this creation can go is examined by Mordecai Richler in the *Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, where he looks at the Jewish conscience with more than just a suggestion of the puritanical theme of retribution. The ambition of Duddy Kravitz can only be checked by his latent, often submerged, humanity. It is Virgil, his epileptic assistant, who is sacrificed to enable Duddy to dismount the Merry-go-Round of cynical pride and bitterness and to know himself. Duddy's conscience is not sufficiently developed to give the sacrificial death of Virgil lasting significance. Instead, he is hopelessly crippled as a result of Duddy's overwhelming ambition, and is allowed to live as a continuous reminder of pride and arrogance. Virgil's accident is the crucial point in the young life of Duddy Kravitz. It means his financial ruin, but it is his spiritual salvation. It is important, for at the end of the novel he can kick the crutches away from Dingleman, the Boy Wonder, Duddy's inspiration, and say "Run, you bastard, run". Duddy is learning, but to what is he apprenticed?

Some must suffer so that others may live in peace. This is as true of Virgil and Duddy as it is of the two young French Canadian friends Jean Colin and Denis Boucher in *The Town Below* by Roger Lemelin. Like Stephen Dedalus, who must soar above the petty problems of God and country, so Denis is involved in a struggle to extricate himself from the stifling mire of church and reactionary politics in Quebec. He is a philosopher and a writer, and he is growing from a limited consciousness to a more abstract concern with

universal truth. It is not coincidental that the death of Jean occurs simultaneously with the arrival of the letter announcing that Denis has won an essay contest. In the conflict of the sick and the well, the old and the new, Denis is the winner. The death of his friend is a symbolic break with the forces which can strangle the soul of an artist. It is for Denis an encounter with reality and with the abstractions of life and death. Out of his experience with Jean will evolve a greater contribution to society and to literature. It is the end and the beginning, death and resurrection: the commitment.

The offering up of a sacrificial lamb has often been the method by which Canadian writers have drawn attention to the irresponsibilities of a smug and neglectful society. Jean Colin would certainly have lived were it not for ignorance and neglect. Daniel Lacasse in *The Tin Flute*, by Gabrielle Roy, is another victim of society. His illness is a symbol of neglect and the wilful murder of hope for the underprivileged. Daniel, with the unsteady warble of a cheap tin flute, cried out and was not heard. He is a voice in the wilderness. In his ultimate rejection of the woman who bore him, Roseanna, he offers the severest criticism of a society that is unfit for children. Inherent in the death of Daniel, however, is the possibility that the unborn child of Florentine will benefit from this kind of criticism.

If a civilization which allows for survival of the fittest is entirely successful, then all innocence would be destroyed. Innocence does not equip the absolutely good for the lifelong conflict with evil. Morley Callaghan examines this phase of the sacrificial ritual in his novel *The Loved and the Lost*. Society is not ready for the moral perfection of Peggy Sanderson, for whom all men are equal; it teaches that if Christ were alive today we would either kill him again or put him into a mental institution. In the novel, black men and white approach one another only for the ritual of Peggy's death. The very fact that she has lived as the archetypal form of an absolute, assures a more balanced equation between good and evil. But she is sacrificed. There are many Christian associations with her death (oddly Christian and sexual, or so it appears), and McAlpine, though he cannot find the church that he and Peggy once visited, has learned to face life more completely; he has gained a renewal.

It has been said that the twentieth century belongs to Canada. It is the obligation of the new generation, to whom this country has been given as a legacy, to resurrect the youth of a decadent past. There is an inherent danger in adopting the modern cynical position, with its disdain for tradition, in that the positive aspects of that tradition may be buried with the evidence of decadence. Canada is not a new country whose citizens are spontaneously merg-

ing from the thigh of Zeus or the rib of Adam. It is, hopefully, a fertile country where, free from disease and neglect, the old ideas may take root again and assume the shape of the future.

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

This kind of rebirth obviously cannot be effected without some form of sacrifice. This sacrifice has often been as mundane as the denial of the comfort of growing old in the scene of youth surrounded by tradition and familiar faces. For Jewish Canadians this tradition has most often been one of persecution and exile in the land of their birth. To the Jewish immigrant, Canada is most significantly the Promised Land. Jewish Canadian writing is the most heavily symbolic, an attempt to relate the prophecy of the Old Testament to the present condition.

An example of this is in A. M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*, where the author provides a contemporary version of the Old Testament. In the novel, the young Canadian probes the significance of past and present for the Jew and for Everyman. The picaresque journey which takes him from Europe, Africa, and finally back to the Holy Land is the regressive study of the history of the Jewish people. In order to know himself, he must find his Uncle Melech, who represents the tradition which is his birthright. Uncle Melech is the universal Jew who has believed, suffered, questioned, and rebelled against the old world. The novel develops as a spiritual experience which culminates in the ritual sacrifice of the uncle, a profound symbol of hope and resurrection. The death of Uncle Melech is coincidental with the founding of the state of Israel. It means the end of suffering and disillusionment and the beginning of a new life:

I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving,  
I will pay that I vowed.

A more obvious metaphor is that of Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*. In a sense, it is a summing up of the whole meaning and control of the sacrifice

as it is used by Canadian writers. The theme of the sacrifice is used to integrate the novel; the circle of action of the sacrifice as an act is manifest also in the cyclic action of the novel, in the structure, the plot, the style, and the settings. The circle does not lose, through Miss Wiseman's exploration, its sense of mystery and awe, but reveals a way of life filled with the joy of natural harmony, progressive and static.

*The Sacrifice* deals with the particular immigration of a Jewish family from the Ukraine to Canada. In a new world, Abraham, his wife Sarah, and his son Isaac are forced to adapt themselves not only to a new language, but also to new customs and beliefs. This physical progression from old to new, a basic cycle in life, is clearly demonstrated. In the New World, Abraham finds that, contrary to Jewish custom, one must work on Saturday, that the women have children in modern hospitals, that mass production has displaced the more unified craftsmanship of the old country. Abraham's immigration is not merely a physical transplantation, but also a spiritual growth from the soul-searing experience of witnessing the death of his two eldest sons, Moses and Jacob, to a new beginning.

"I was impatient", Abraham tells his friend Chaim, "to begin again, to send down our roots, somewhere." From a religious point of view, Abraham's experience has been like death; emerging after three days from a neighbour's dark cellar, he is "resurrected" to find "How his eyes ached—unbearable shooting pains from the sudden light." Abraham sees himself as the builder, the tree of life. Like the Biblical Abraham, he feels compelled to lead his family to a new land and to establish a race of God's people. In the purge in the Ukraine there had been a miracle: the life of his youngest son, Isaac, has been saved. It is upon Isaac that Abraham depends for the fulfilment of his vision: "to grow, to discover, to build".

By generalizing the setting—which, aside from being Canadian, is never specifically given—and by giving her characters, like those in the Bible, no surname, Adele Wiseman successfully emphasizes the cyclic action involved in searching for a new land to replace the old. All the characters in the novel are faced with the same problem: how much of the old should be discarded, and how much retained to form the thread of continuity in the new life? As it is obvious to Isaac, mass production is a necessary improvement upon the crafts of the old world. Yet, also, because he sees his father retaining the ideas of the old world, and because of his own background, Isaac struggles. In his dreams, Isaac is naked and imprisoned in a transparent bubble of plastic. In this bubble, he stretches and struggles so that it does not shrink in on him.

He experiences pain in his struggle to burst the bubble in which he can see his own grimacing reflection. His nakedness is his vulnerability to things that are new. The plastic sphere represents the tradition in which new concepts struggle. He struggles against the old, but he knows that to break through completely provides an illusory solution. "If I broke through", he tells his wife, "I'd no longer have the sphere as my boundary, but I'd lose its protection, too. The bubble bursts, and I burst with it into the unknown. On the other hand, if I give way, I collapse, I am crushed, again into the unknown." Thus the circumference of this bubble of tradition, fragile and transparent as it may be, becomes a necessary yardstick against which new ideas must be tested to assess their strength. The important thing, then, is the keeping of a sense of balance between the old and the new.

Isaac is aware of life's complexity and cannot devote himself to any one aspect of it. His comprehension of the significance of it is in direct contrast with his religious reflexes, which induce him to save the Torah when the synagogue is burning. He is aware of the several possibilities life offers and of the ironic discrepancy between the old and the new. Since he is an ironist, Isaac tends to think, rather than to act. As a result, when he does act, as when he saves the Torah, his actions seem somewhat inconsistent with each other. Each time he acts, he does so in accordance with a wavering frame of mind. His wife says: "Here was the real world beside him, and what did he do? He lived in the real world. The real world was something close to him. It was something today to him. It was something today and tomorrow." It is with the real world that the ironist is concerned. Isaac does live in the real world, in contrast to his mother, who lives in a fantasy world of the past, and to his father, who lives in a fantasy world of the future. The real world is the world of the present, the here and the now. Isaac, then, presents the many-faceted present, so difficult to grasp and so demanding. But in the sequence of time, the present too must die, and so Isaac dies, having suffered a heart attack subsequent to his heroic rescue of the Torah from the synagogue.

So the father, Abraham, with his fixation upon the future, waits to mould his life to his obsession. There is the grandson waiting to do something, to forge the future. So Abraham murders Liah, for he feels she represents evil; she is against his creed (to grow, to discover, to build); she is barren, and she must be sacrificed for the future; out of the death of Liah will come the chance for renewal. When he is confined to the asylum on Mad Mountain, he thinks of the future; he says to Moses, the grandson: "Ruth says you will be a fine fiddle-player . . . God willing, you will grow." But Abraham



feels, as he tells Chaim, that "the future contained all the unknown good that God had planned, if only a person had the patience and the strength to wait." The sacrifice of Laiah bears witness to the fact that Abraham himself has *not* the patience. He is too eager to see realized the future he dreams about. But time advances; the sacrifice is made; the past and present die, leaving the future a glimmering hope. Though at times only a study of a sick mind, *The Sacrifice* does hold all the meaning of its title. Abraham sacrifices, for "now is the time for the circle to close, to enclose him in its safety, in its peace." This is the sacrificial circle, the "uncompleted circle, when the maker of the sacrifice and the sacrificer himself and the Demander who is the Receiver of the sacrifice are poised together, and life flows into eternity, and for a moment all these three are as one." So Abraham offers death to the mystery of life, the mystery the grandson will tackle and complete.

The grandson, for whom the sacrifice has been made, will "make music". Not only will Moses have "singing thoughts" and know "the right singing words"; he will actually be a musician, playing the violin. In the last scene of the novel, Moses, now a young man, goes to see his grandfather on Mad Mountain, and the continuation of the family characteristic is emphasized. "It was as though he stood suddenly within the threshold of a different kind of understanding, no longer crouching behind locked doors, but standing upright, with his grandfather leading him". This symbolic laying-on-of-hands climaxes the theme of generic rather than individual rebirth. The hands are fused because to the creative man, hands are essential. Although, from one point of view, Abraham has murdered Laiah, from another point of view he has sacrificed her, if to anyone, to Moses—Moses who represents the future. His hand, then, has created something, a whole visionary world for Moses, the grandson. Death, to Abraham, in one sense is a creative act. "I think", he earlier said to Chaim, "that death is sown in all of us when we are conceived, and grown within the womb of life, feeding on it, until one day it bursts out. We say then that life is dead. But really, death is born." So, as the hands fuse when the two meet, Abraham's strength and sense of purpose are absorbed by Moses. More than this, though, he is led by his grandfather "within the threshold of a different kind of understanding", for from the fusion of the grandfather and grandson, murderer and artist, old and young, come a vision of the hand of man—everyman. Moses gains what his grandfather lacked, an understanding of his fellow man. For inherent in the ritualistic sacrifice of Laiah, the action around which the novel is focussed, is the renewed possibility of life.

It is the crowning achievement of Abraham's life and his legacy to his grandson, and to the new country in which they live.

Out of the past, then, comes the present made more perfect through suffering. Out of death comes life. Out of the countries sick with the disease of age, comes the new country of uncorrupted ideals:

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness. . . . (Psalm xxx, 11).

In the Bible, a primary source for symbolic imagery in Canadian letters, the intended sacrifice and eventual salvation of Isaac and the people of Israel occur in the Book of Genesis, the beginning of a long and eventful history. Similarly, Canadian literature is in the Book of *its* Genesis, the formative stage, in which pain and pleasure, birth and death, sincerity and artifice, are intermingled. In order for the seed to germinate, Canadian writers must preserve the positive aspects of their heritage and leave behind the toxic conventions which have slowly killed the optimism of the older cultures. Inherent in the dilemma of the modern Canadian writer is the idea of the sacrifice. Consciously and unconsciously, this phenomenon has become a significant part of the early stages of the literature. It manifests itself in the death of the individual or of the spirit, where the signs of decadence must be obliterated to permit the growth of a nation, a literature, or a human being.

## COME UNAWARES

*Dora M. Pettinella*

Quick as a squirrel  
when it climbs the highest bough  
swift as a sparrow  
when it perches on the tallest eave  
natural as hate  
when it grows without reason  
strong as an eagle  
when it spots its prey  
death should come unawares  
unseen unfelt  
that we may never learn  
to distinguish its face.