W. K. Thomas

WE'RE STILL SINKING, SIR!

Many readers may have already encountered a certain quatrain about the moon, but in these days of lunar exploration it is only appropriate that we take another look:

> O Moon, when I gaze on thy beautiful face,
> Careering along through the boundaries of space,
> The thought has often come into my mind,
> If I ever shall see thy glorious behind.[1]

The sort of thing which the "Housemaid Poet" who wrote this poem achieved has already formed the subject of an earlier essay by Alexander Pope, which he called "Peribathous, or the Art of *Sinking* in Poetry."[2] Modelled on Longinus' "Perihypsous, or the Art of *Rising* in Poetry," Pope's essay sought to give instruction in how to succeed in the other direction.

It is not as easy as it may at first appear, and I would invite you to join me in examining how various poets achieve success in what is actually a difficult endeavour. Towards the end you will find a surprise that should fill you with patriotic pleasure.

It is true that a few geniuses could achieve sinking, or bathos, in a single phrase. John Ruskin could casually toss off a phrase like this, addressed to his heart, "Thou little bounder, rest."[3] John Dryden could refer to his exalted heroine, the lovely Thais, as "a blooming eastern bride."[4] Shelley ended the first version of a deeply philosophical poem "pinnacled dim in the intense inane."[5] And Keats, being more sensuous, depicted his exalted river god, enamoured of a beauteous nymph, "striving how / To entice her to a dive!"[6] Of the four, Shelley alone made use of current meaning: the other three added linguistic prophecy to their genius and wrote for posterity.

Other, lesser poets usually have to build up a suitable context so that the ambiguity of their key phrase may strike with full force. That favourite poet

of scholars, Anon., set the stage for his bride and her wedding thus:

> O never, never she'll forget
> The happy, happy day
> When in the church, before God's priest,
> She gave herself away.[7]

William Wordsworth too used great skill in building up his context in "Simon Lee." He slyly describes his hero thus:

> And he is lean and he is sick:
> His body, dwindled and awry,
> Rests upon ankles swoln and thick;
> His legs are thin and dry.
> One prop he has, and only one,

and now, when he has us expecting a crutch or a cane, he sinks swiftly to his identification:

> His wife, an aged woman.[8]

These poets made use of ambiguity to achieve their sinking, words that look bravely upwards as they plummet towards the depths. Another device is the use of a bold form of syntax. Poets of Pope's day didn't think of this particular device, but their successors did, and William Nathan Stedman was quick to bend the reference of objectives to his use in these lines:

> And when upon your dainty breast I lay
> My wearied head, more soft that eiderdown.[9]

Earlier poets, not knowing of this device, made use of the next best thing, and by taking care to proceed from a large idea to a much smaller one without any intervention (like stepping directly from a mountain top to the valley floor), they secured the sudden sinking they desired. Edmund Waller, when praising the grandeur of English triumphs, used two geographic areas of contrasting size for his magniloquence:

> Under the Tropic is our language spoke,
> And part of Flanders hath received our yoke.[10]

And a military officer was identified in a similar double, shrinking way:

> And thou, Dalhousie, the great God of War,
> Lieutenant-Colonel to the Earl of Mar.[11]

This last couplet is tantamount to a Canadian poet's writing a poem on World War II ("The Volunteer") and saying:

> So Johnny joined the martial strife,
> Agreed to everything:
> To shoot, to fight, to give his life
> For God and Mackenzie King.[12]

But, as Pope found, the most effective, though admittedly the most difficult, method of sinking in poetry is to rely on the thought alone. Pope illustrated by referring to those genuinely heroic lines in the 104th Psalm which read thus, referring to the Lord:

> He *looks* on the earth, and it trembles.
> He *touches* the hills, and they smoke.

To make this passage sink in a paraphrase would require a poet to think *small*, really small. Sir Richard Blackmore, a popular contemporary of Pope's, did just that and triumphed thus:

> The hills forget they're fixed, and in their fright
> Cast off their weight, and ease themselves for flight:
> The woods, with terror winged, outfly the wind,
> And leave the heavy, panting hills behind.

Pope comments: "You here see the hills not only trembling, but shaking off the woods from their backs, to run the faster. After this you are presented with a foot-race of mountains and woods, where the woods distance the mountains that, like corpulent pursy fellows, come puffing and panting a vast way behind them."[13]

But Pope need not have thought, as evidently he did, that his contemporaries had achieved the greatest success in sinking. Later writers have stooped to challenge that success. Another Anon. took the staggeringly exalted thought of thinking even though lying dead and yoked to it a double rhyme:

> . . . My grave's a bed,
> Where I lie down on roses;
> I lie in state, and meditate
> Upon the law of Moses.[14]

In 1781 John Logan achieved near-perfection by proceeding through pathos. He described an old man and his only daughter forced out of their ancestral home, at night of course, into the wintry blast of driving rain:

Clasped in his daughter's trembling hand,
He journeyed sad and slow;
At times he stopped to look behind,
And tears began to flow.

Wearied, and faint, and cold, and wet,
To shelter did he hie;
"Beneath the covert of this rock,
My Daughter, let us die!"

At midnight, in the weary waste,
In sorrow sat the pair;
She chafed his shivering hands, and wrung
The water from his hair.[15]

Mrs. Mary Robinson perhaps excelled Mr. Logan, in that she achieved the same success in a much smaller compass, largely through her perceptive choice of names. She has the ghost of her heroine describe her earthly career and death thus:

Peerless Bertha was my name,
First in beauty, first in fame!
Gallant Hubert was my pride:
Hubert fell, and Bertha died![16]

A Victorian poet of some renown proved that Pope was wrong about one thing. Pope said that genius was not necessary for success in the art of sinking: skill suffices.[17] But consider what Coventry Patmore did. In a poem addressed to the Virgin Mary and entitled "Regina Coeli" (Queen of Heaven), he asked:

And was it awful in that narrow house,
With God for Babe and Spouse?[18]

Not only does he reduce each of the two divine doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation, but also, by bringing them together as he does, he further reduces them, by means of a negative geometric progression. Then by an adroitly ambiguous use of his "narrow house" he diminishes them still further. And all this within two short lines! Now can skill alone account for this success? Surely genius is at work.

Patmore was of course not the only genius to succeed in sinking. We have already seen Dryden and Shelley, Keats and Ruskin. But Wordsworth met the challenge of all these rivals and, as often, showed best how to sink in

poetry. In the first edition of "The Thorn" he proceeded relentlessly to his goal, showing great skill in progressively narrowing in on his target:

> High on a mountain's highest ridge,
> Where oft the stormy winter gale
> Cuts like a scythe, while thro' the clouds
> It sweeps from vale to vale;
> Not five yards from the mountain path
> This Thorn you on your left espy;
> And to the left, three yards beyond,
> You see a little muddy pond,
> Of water—never dry,
> Though but of compass small, and bare
> To thirsty suns and parching air.
> I've measured it from side to side;
> 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.[19]

Wordsworth showed even greater skill and, for him, uncommon economy of effort in another poem, "Vaudracour and Julia," in which he depends for his effect upon a sudden change in direction. His hero retires to a hermit's lodge with his motherless infant:

> It consoled him here
> To attend upon the orphan, and perform
> Obsequious service to the precious child,
> Which, after a short time, by some mistake
> Or indiscretion of the Father, died.[20]

How's that for a trap door dropping open?

These lines of Wordsworth's, however, are really not the supreme achievement of sinking, for, I am glad—and proud—to report, it is Canadian poets who have captured the inverted laurel wreath for sinking in poetry. In fact, those laurel leaves should probably now be replaced with maple.

There is of course Mackenzie King's classic example of sudden shrinking: "Conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription."[21] Recently I heard a Canadian student rival Coventry Patmore, but in a more pleasant way. When asked to describe the relation to God of the created universe filled with the immanence of a deity still transcendent, he replied, "It's a chip off the old block." And Sarah Binks, the sweet songstress of Saskatchewan, achieved a feat which escaped even Wordsworth. She created a succession of sinkings, each lower than the preceding: she shows us how inverted Alps on Alps descend; beneath the lowest depths she reveals a lower deep:

Is this the tree that saw our first love's plighting,
And those the leaves that heard our first love's vow,
And yonder limb that saw love's first delighting,
Is that the very limb, the self-same bough?
Is this its scanty shade where love first hit me,
And caterpillars tumbled from on high;
Is yonder ant the very ant that bit me,
And them the same mosquitoes in the sky?[22]

There is, one suspects, in Sarah Binks a certain sly self-consciousness, on her part or her biographer's,* but other Canadian poets in all innocence warble their native woodnotes wild. Two collections in particular provide superb examples of their achievement: an essay in William Arthur Deacon's book entitled *The Four Jameses*[23] and the second issue of a prairie poetry magazine called *The Crescent Moon*, published in Spring, 1935.[24]

Ambiguity appears in two forms in the Deacon collection. There is a joyful ambiguity in what the widowed Ontario poetess, Mrs. Kate (McIntyre) Ruttan, wrote about her Presbyterian minister: Mr. Lavis:

Three cheers for Lavis,
He sings like a mavis,
Preaches like Paul,
Like Apollo does water,
Demands a revival,
And of good the survival,
Oh, happy the clay
In the hands of this potter.[25]

And there is a nicely discriminating kind of ambiguity in the way in which the Newfoundland poetess, Anastasia Hogan, described the narrow escape which the oil tanker *Rotterdam* had from colliding with a rock:

Our harbour now is this ship's home,
Saved from the surging, threat'ning foam,
Good luck has guided her off the rock,
And gave her a chance to try our dock.[26]

It must be admitted, however, that the laurels for ambiguity go to the prairies,

* Editor's Note:
It is perhaps interesting to point to Paul Hiebert's assertion that "All the characters in this book are fictitious, including the author," and also to Lloyd Wheeler's comment that "In the days of Sarah's infancy Hiebert used to declare, 'It is hard to write a good bad poem' ". (Introduction to New Canadian Library *Sarah Binks*.)

for there Mildred V. Thornton achieved a rapid doubling of ambiguities, which more than doubled the effect, when she described water birds in her prairie pastoral. She first set the scene with great tenderness:

> On a tiny lake,
> Where long reeds sway
> In the ripple's wake;
> And baby ducks
> With hearts aquiver,
> Scurrying, haste
> Where the grasses shiver.

Then with breathtaking economy, she did it:

> A near call
> And a far cry . . .[27]

The prairie writers as a whole make admirable use of metaphor to secure their sinking. To point out that the eyes of our soul must be cleansed before we can see God's love, Mrs. J. A. Smith chose a homely metaphor:

> Sunshine is brighter
> If our windows are clean.[28]

Admittedly our native poets had some help in their use of metaphor in sinking. M. C. Bartlett had shown what can be achieved when a metaphor suddenly becomes literal. He wrote:

> Would you know the baby's skies?
> Baby's skies are mother's eyes.
> Mother's eyes and smile together
> Make the baby's pleasant weather.
>
> Mother, keep your eyes from tears,
> Keep your heart from foolish fears.
> Keep your lips from dull complaining
> Lest the baby think 'tis raining.[29]

But our own prairie poets were still able to improve on this. Albin Edmund Elsom used a submerged water metaphor when he described the exhilarating blossoms of springtime as "free / From Winter's prison house,"

> Tossing their kisses on tree and shrub,
> Enveloping all with a fragrant douse
> From their perfume tub.[30]

If the names of these poets should appear comparatively unknown, there are two reasons. The first is that, as the editor of *The Crescent Moon* remarked, many of them "write under assumed names and do not desire their identity divulged."[31] The second reason is that for one to shrink suddenly from the large, to sink swiftly from the heights, one must first achieve the large and attain the heights, and one-armed jugglers and verbal mobiles (the preoccupations of the better-known poets of the present day) provide little opportunity for either. In this way our leading poets deprive themselves of the first step in the art of sinking.

Our lesser-known poets have used the effects of rhyme to help them in sinking and in doing so have triumphed far beyond the English poet who joined double rhyme to his juxtaposed thought of meditating while lying dead. Writing in the manner of Rupert Brooke, V. Bruce Chilton of *The Crescent Moon* used rhyme, as had many a good poet of the past, to signal the sudden change in direction of this thought:

> O youth, not quite of earth! Your dreams are God's.
> You are fresh sprung from fountains, where they flow
> At heaven's gate. Unconquerable, not clods. . . .[32]

A Nova Scotian, V. B. Rhodenizer, improved on both Chilton and the Moses-meditator: in writing about Canadians, he startlingly juxtaposed the two thoughts that, racially speaking, we are at one and the same time motley and pure, and then skilfully joined to this juxtaposition, not single, not double, but a rollicking triple rhyme to complete the swift descent from the proud heights:

> From south to north, from coast to coast,
> Victorian or Acadian,
> Whatever blood our veins may boast,
> We all are pure Canadian.[33]

The same Nova Scotian achieved the second most glorious feat of sinking I have ever encountered. Where the Newfoundlander in writing about the near escape of the *Rotterdam* displayed a certain juvenile innocence, V. B. Rhodenizer was more learned in his elaboration of a near disaster. In a sonnet on the death of a Canadian pilot in action, the poet celebrates the pilot's sweeping "sublimely through Europe's bomb-rent skies," his "philosophic mind," his leadership, and then concludes with lines that, beautifully matching expression with thought, achieve that abrupt change in direction which, as Wordsworth well knew, is the essence of sinking:

> . . . with final flight came glorious end:
> Fate took your life but could not touch your soul:
> You brought your plane down in complete control.[34]

But it is still to the prairies that we must go to witness the greatest feat of all in the noble art of sinking. Mildred V. Thornton—she of the near call and the far cry—has rivalled Dryden, Ruskin, and Keats in their ability to sink within a single phrase; in fact she has even eclipsed them, for where they relied upon a future change in meaning for their effect, she has shown a confidence in the present and has even added a distinctively Canadian touch when she entitled her delicate pastoral poem, "Evening by a Slough."[35]

Yes, Mr. Pope, we're still sinking, sir!

NOTES

1. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*, ed. D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee (London: Dent, 1948), p. 12.
2. Published in 1727 and readily available in Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Rinehart, 1951), pp. 306-60, and *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope*, ed. Aubrey Williams (Boston: Houghton, 1969), pp. 387-438.
3. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl*, p. 14.
4. *Alexander's Feast* (1697), l. 10. Available in *Selected Works of John Dryden*, ed. William Frost (New York: Holt, 1953), p. 75.
5. *Prometheus Unbound* (1826), III, 204. He added the fourth act as a virtual afterthought. Available in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1943), p. 253.
6. *Endymion* (1818), II, 940-41. Available in *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. 103.
7. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl*, p. 10.
8. "Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman" (1798), ll. 33-38. One of the famous Lyrical Ballads. Available in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), p. 379.
9. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl*, p. 16. Stedman flourished ca. 1907-16.
10. Edmund Waller, "Upon the Late Storm, and of the Death of His Highness Ensuing the Same" (1658), ll. 21-22, in *The Poems of Edmund Waller*, ed. G. Thorn-Drury (London: Lawrence, and New York: Scribners, 1893), p. 163. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl*, p. 3, and in Pope, p. 336 (Wimsatt) and p. 416 (Williams).
11. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl*, p. 3, and in Pope, p. 336 (Wimsatt) and p. 416 (Williams). This couplet constitutes the earliest known Dalhousie Review.

12. Contributed by the author of this essay, so as to increase the Canadian content to the required 55%.
13. Pope, p. 326 (Wimsatt) and p. 406 (Williams). Blackmore's *Paraphrase on the Book of Job* appeared in 1716.
14. Quoted in *The Stuffed Owl*, p. 19.
15. The poem, called "A Tale," runs pp. 54-77 in his Poems (London: T. Cadell, 1781).
16. The poem, called "Bosworth Field," runs pp. 39-45 in Vol. II of her *Poetical Works* (London: 1806). Mrs. Robinson flourished ca. 1782-1800.
17. Pope, p. 354 (Wimsatt) and p. 433 (Williams).
18. Published in 1878, available in *Poems by Coventry Patmore*, ed. Basil Champneys (London: Bell, 1909), p. 430, and quoted in *To Mother: An Anthology of Mother Verse*, ed. Kate Douglas Wiggin (Boston: Houghton, 1917), p. 83.
19. "The Thorn" (1798), II. 23-35. Another of the famous Lyrical Ballads. *Poetical Works*, p. 157. The last two lines were omitted after the first edition; they can be seen in *Parodies*, ed. Dwight Macdonald (New York: Random, 1960), p. 483.
20. "Vaudracour and Julia" (1820), II. 276-80. *Poetical Works*, p. 99.
21. To be found engraved on the conscience of a nation.
22. "The Plight," II. 1-8, in Paul Hiebert, *Sarah Binks* (1947; rptd. Toronto: McClelland, 1964), pp. 54-55. It appears that Sarah Binks is the poetic voice of her supposed biographer, Professor Hiebert.
23. *The Four Jameses*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1953; 1st. ed. 1927).
24. A copy of this exceedingly rare magazine can be found in the University of Waterloo Library. The title page contains the following information: "The Crescent Moon: A Magazine of Original Verse by Canadian Prairie Writers. Issued in connection with the Prairie Poetry Club, and printed at . . . Moose Jaw, Sask." The editor was C. J. Greene, who was evidently oblivious to the architectural connotations of the title.
25. Reprinted from Mrs. Ruttan's *Rhymes Right or Wrong of Rainy River* (1926), Deacon, p. 169.
26. Deacon, p. 170. Another Newfoundlander, writing in prose, compared the cattle ferry in Codroy Valley unfavourably to Noah's Ark, since Noah "was never obliged to get out and push" (Deacon, p. 183).
27. *Crescent Moon*, 2nd issue (Spring, 1935), p. 15.
28. "Windows," II. 1-2, in *The Crescent Moon*, p. 21.
29. Entitled "Baby's Skies" and quoted in *To Mother*, p. 16.
30. "Blossoms," II. 1-2, 5-7, in *The Crescent Moon*, p. 31.
31. *Crescent Moon*, p. 3.
32. "To Youth," II. 9-11, in *The Crescent Moon*, p. 7.
33. "Theme Song," II. 5-8, in V. B. Rhodenizer, *Canada for Man and Other Poems* (Wolfville, N. S.: printed for the author, 1958), p. 5.
34. "To Wing Commander L. Sydney Ford," II. 12-14, in Rhodenizer, p. 10.
35. *Crescent Moon*, p. 15.