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Postmodernism and the Contemporary Canadian Novel:
The Works of Jack Hodgins, Robert Kroetsch,
Michael Ondaatje and Audrey Thomas
as Responses to the Postmodern Philosophy of Survival

by
Karen Germundson, M.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research, University of Ottawa
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

February 5, 1987



Karen Germundson, Ottawa, Canada, 1987.

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ISBN 0-315-46773-8



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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor John G. Moss for introducing me to the works of Hodgins, Kroetsch, and Thomas, and for offering help and encouragement while I was working on this dissertation. Thanks to Linda Cooke and Stephen DePaul for sharing with me their views on postmodernism. I am grateful to Kathy Jeffrey, Professor Keith Wilson, and Stewart Zeyl for their assistance. I am especially indebted to Professor David Jeffrey for his patience, concern and generous advice.

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Abstract

Irving Howe, one of the pioneers of postmodernist criticism, argued in 1959, in Decline of the New, that postmodern fiction can be best understood when it is examined in a cultural context. Gerald Graff complained in 1979 that although Howe's argument is sound, critics have ignored his proposal, and instead have used very different criteria for evaluating postmodern fiction. It is in the cultural context identified by Howe, and defined in further detail by Graff, that I have proposed to examine the works of four Canadian authors considered to be postmodern: Jack Hodgins, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje and Audrey Thomas. Their works have been viewed as postmodern from perspectives other than the one defended by Howe and Graff--for instance, some critics have explored their fiction as models of the literature of exhaustion. I am interested, however, in the way all four writers address the postmodern philosophy of survival, a philosophy that has been defined by literary critics such as Howe, Graff, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan and Richard Palmer, and by sociologists such as Shirley Sugerman and Christopher Lasch.

The main premise upon which this philosophy is based asserts that in a world in which the odds are against survival, we must permit ourselves to do anything, however atrocious, to stay alive. As Hassan has rightly argued, this premise has some alarming implications, implications we

cannot afford to overlook. In effect, what the philosophy of postmodernism demands of us is that we divest ourselves of our humanity.

Agreeing with Hassan that the implications of postmodernism must be considered, I have evaluated the works of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas as imaginative responses to the world posited by postmodernists: that is, a world made uninhabitable by violence. I feel that, in many ways, each of the four responses is inadequate. I attribute that inadequacy, in the works of Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas, to the narcissistic perspective the three authors are writing from. Hodgins' case is somewhat different: I suspect he has failed to meet the challenge the philosophy of postmodernism presents us with because his naive concept of the dark self that is in all of us keeps him from appreciating how serious the implications of postmodernism are.

While I regard as inadequate the responses to postmodernism represented by the works of Hodgins, Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Thomas, I conclude nevertheless that all four writers have made an important contribution to Canadian literature, a contribution they are able to make because they have been part of the postmodern literary movement. What postmodernism as a literary movement taught these writers was how to portray a view of existence Canadian writers have long been struggling to depict in their work, without complete success. This is the accomplishment, then, of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas--to portray our lives as being

mundane, yet marvellous. Such a view of existence affords us what the philosophy of postmodernism cannot: not just the possibility of inhabiting once more a world we thought had grown uninhabitable, but also the possibility of living there without having to forfeit our humanity.

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Introduction

In 1959, Irving Howe identified as "postmodern" a new kind of fiction that began to be written right after World War II ("Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction"). The works of postmodern writers were deficient, he observed, what authors were "stumbling against" was the amorphousness of "mass society" (Decline of the New 196).

How to give shape to a world increasingly shapeless and an experience increasingly fluid; how to reclaim the central assumption of the novel that telling relations can be discovered between a style of social behavior and a code of moral judgment, or if that proves impossible, to find ways of imaginatively projecting the code in its own right--these were the difficulties that faced the young novelists (198).

Philip Roth, two years later, made a similar diagnosis. Our society had become so amoral, and experience so absurd, that writers, he reported, could no longer interpret their world ("Writing American Fiction" 35). "For a writer of fiction to feel that he does not really live in his own country . . . must seem a serious occupational impediment," he observed, "For what will his subject be?" (35). In that same year, Iris Murdoch explained in her essay "Against Dryness" that writers were having difficulty understanding, and then

portraying experience because they were "losing [their] sense of form and structure in the moral world" (29). Eight years later, Howe was warning that the problem had become urgent: in his essay "The New York Intellectuals", he restated his argument that fiction was in a state of decline because it was being written in a "period of overwhelming cultural sleaziness" (264). The problem, he felt, had worsened since he wrote "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction": during that time a new sensibility had emerged which he considered incapable of producing good art because it believed in nothing. He argued that to understand the decline of fiction, and possibly reverse the condition, the literary community had to study the cultural context of postmodern literature. One of his contemporaries, Leslie Fiedler, was also urging critics to take this approach, not because he saw the new sensibility as a problem, however, but because he felt an important change had taken place in the relation between audience and critics. As he perceived it, the two had reversed roles, so that the audience had become the "leader of taste", and the critics were now the "followers". If the critics were to appreciate postmodern fiction, they would have to have new criteria for evaluating it--criteria established by Pop Culture ("Cross that Bridge--Close that Gap" 478).

As well as Howe and Fiedler, a number of other critics have documented the new sensibility which has produced the fiction called "postmodern"--among them Gerald Graff, Ihab

Hassan, Christopher Lasch, Norman Mailer, Richard E. Palmer, and Shirley Sugerman. Combining their observations, we can arrive at a reasonably comprehensive picture of the cultural context of postmodern literature.

The "new sensibility" is characterized by radical thinking.¹ Graff describes it as "express[ing] a hopefulness for revolutionary changes in society through radical transformations in human consciousness." It is "not only a break with the past but [an] attempt to envision and create a revolutionary future . . . allied with radical social and political criticism" ("The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough" 384). Hassan argues like Graff that dramatic "innovations in consciousness are at hand" (The Literature of Silence 216). He quotes Jean Dubuffet, who says, "I have the impression that a complete liquidation of all the ways of thinking, whose sum constituted what has been called humanism and has been fundamental for our culture since the Renaissance, is now taking place, or, at least going to take place very soon" (Paracriticisms xiii).

As these descriptions imply, the new sensibility rejects humanism.² Citing Richard Gilman, Graff argues that we have dispensed with humanist values: "the old Mediterrean values--the respect for the sanctity of the individual soul, the importance of logical clarity, brotherhood, reason as arbiter, political order, community--are dead as useful frames of reference or pertinent guides to procedure" (408).

It is because we perceive ourselves as being faced with an unprecedented crisis that we are rejecting humanism for

the radical way of thinking called "postmodern." Our world is growing uninhabitable--as Hassan puts it, we are "threatened . . . at the same instant, by extermination and totalitarianism"--and it would appear that to survive, we must have a new philosophy (Paracriticisms 59). Mailer presents a similar argument that we must become "philosophical psychopaths" to "live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as l'univers concentrationnaire, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled" ("The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" 277). Both Hassan and Mailer see our situation as desperate: we are "past the meridian of the twentieth century," Hassan observes, "a devastating war behind us, and a war we dare not call by any name lowering ahead" (Radical Innocence 3). "Poised at the edge of the Space Age, we have no recourse but to choose life over death, turning our attention to this time and to this place, and to the actions of man and to his works which make time and place an habitation for his spirit" (3). We have to find a way, he says "of making life possible in this world" ("Laughter in the Dark" 636).

Faced, then, with the choice of annihilation or survival, we are determined not to be victims. Hassan confirms this with the observation that "the prominent role played by terrorism and rebellion in the last hundred years of Western history must persuade us that man is no willing victim to his future" (Radical Innocence 13). But our

initial response was not rebellion--we resigned ourselves at first to the role of victim because we did not realize then that we had options. Howe explains that we saw ourselves in an "apocalyptic cul-de-sac", overwhelmed by an "extreme sense of historical impasse, the assumption that something about the experience of our age [was] unique, a catastrophe without precedent" (5). The "new sensibility" emerged when we realized we did, in fact, have options, that survival was still a possibility. Hassan and Palmer have observed that postmodern thinking is concerned with alternatives, a set of "radical alternatives to the destiny we assume to be our own" (Paracriticisms 113).

Before we explore those alternatives, and the amoral attitude we must adopt to avail ourselves of them, it is important to note that, as the new sensibility emerged, we began to define what it was we felt menaced by. Our angst gave way to very specific fears of ecological disaster and terrorism. As we adopted a postmodern way of thinking, we came to believe that we exist in a war zone, nature having turned on man, and humanity having turned on itself.³ Our postmodern attitude is that there is only one way to defend ourselves from nature's vicious assault--we must seek a drastic independence from nature. Dennis Lee has documented this aspect of the new sensibility in Savage Fields: World, he says (referring, approximately, to 'society') "needs to believe it has nothing in common with earth (a term we can take to mean, roughly, 'nature')" (21). "The strife of world and earth may define the fundamental structure of

being in our era," he observes (11). Lasch, too, has commented on this postmodern view of nature, which he detects "in its crudest form in disaster movies or in fantasies of space travel, which allow vicarious escape from a doomed planet" (The Culture of Narcissism 100). It is useless, according to the new sensibility, to continue our search for better ways to master nature. We have destroyed all the natural forces that once nurtured us, and have created in their place mutations whose only function is to annihilate. This postmodern vision of nature is reflected in contemporary fiction: William S. Burroughs depicts a poisonous, predatorial jungle of radioactive mutants; Kurt Vonnegut, in Slapstick, depicts a world where, because we have tampered with the force of gravity, we must spend some of our days squashed to the ground, and other days barely anchored to the earth.⁴ A postmodern attitude widely held in our society is that we must arrive at a new understanding of our relation to nature, divesting ourselves of the notion that we are tied to our environment by life support systems--air, water, food, fuel--and seeking an ideal state, in which we would have no needs, and could therefore exist without an environment.⁵ Burroughs' characters have achieved this self-reliance in a radical way: they do not exist in space. Travelling constantly through time, they have won their war against nature.

But while our postmodern society perceives itself to be threatened by nature, it sees a greater menace in terrorism,

which it believes is now being practiced everywhere. Convinced that without our knowing it, terrorists have taken over our world, we believe that there is no place that is safe anymore, and see ourselves all as potential targets. Contemporary fiction voices our postmodern fear of terrorism, depicting hostage-takings, political coups, assassinations, riots, and bombings as having a prominent place in our insignificant, banal lives. In Beryl Bainbridge's Injury Time her middle-aged, middle-class characters grapple not only with the problems of cheating spouses and rebellious children, but of armed gunmen who have stormed their suburban home to use them as hostages. In Margaret Drabble's The Ice Age Anthony Keating is touched directly by political terrorism because of the domestic troubles he is having with his lover and her daughter. While Muriel Spark's Lise, in The Driver's Seat is out walking, preoccupied with personal problems, she inadvertently becomes part of a violent demonstration, and is injured by tear gas.

The new sensibility views the victim of terrorism as a vulnerable fool who ventures out unarmed into a world he knows is violent and dangerous. We do not have to be hostages, the postmodern thinker insists; we set ourselves up as victims because we leave ourselves so vulnerable. Again, we can see this postmodern attitude reflected in contemporary fiction. In Injury Time Bainbridge stresses how utterly unprepared her characters are when they are assaulted by gunmen: they have left themselves wide open for attack, and worsen matters by antagonizing their captors, because

they fail to understand the mentality of the terrorist. John Irving's characters come to grief because they walk right into danger, having failed to take any precautions. We have premonitions and there are warning signs everywhere, Irving says in his novels, but we do not take them into account, naively failing to recognize that the terrorist is in our very midst, and we are all of us targets. But perhaps the most graphic example in contemporary literature of the fool who has set himself up as victim is F. Alexander, in Burgess's A Clockwork Orange. F. Alexander is a philosopher who understands in theory how we are victimized by the terrorism of modern times, but fails to apply that knowledge to protect his wife and himself from violence. Even after they are attacked, and his wife is raped and beaten to death, he fails to learn to recognize danger: Alex shows up at his house again, and, failing to remember him, F. Alexander calls the thug a "victim" and invites him in.

According to the new sensibility, despite the dangers that menace us, nobody need be a victim, because we can make the most uninhabitable world accommodate us. This is the claim made by the New York-based vigilante group, the Guardian Angels, confident they can provide law and order where the police have been unable to keep crime under control. It is the assumption made by women's groups when they demand that the streets be made safe for them at night, and by those who, like Bernard Goetz (the New York citizen who took the law into his own hands and killed one of a group

of thugs who he alleges attacked him) are determined to make the subways safe by any means. We can see what form this postmodern belief takes when it is expressed in contemporary fiction: writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and Günter Grass depict our uninhabitable world as a totalitarian state; Russel Hoban, Doris Lessing and Vonnegut, as the earth all but completely destroyed by a nuclear disaster; Anthony Burgess and Burroughs as the anarchic society our world threatens to become if we take permissiveness to its logical conclusion--the total collapse of authority, and the unchecked spread of urban violence. It is our ability to survive political atrocity, anarchy, or nuclear catastrophe that concerns these writers: we can learn to transcend any outrage or hardship the wasteland confronts us with, they tell us, demonstrating that even the most vulnerable can survive. In Grass's The Tin Drum, Oskar, a handicapped child, can venture out into the streets alone and defend himself. In Lessing's Memoirs of a Survivor, twelve-year-old Emily and the middle-aged lady assigned as her "guardian" are just as capable of fending for themselves in their dangerous world as the barbaric gang leaders who presume to offer them protection. In Golding's Darkness Visible, before rescuers can reach Matty, the child delivers himself from an inferno.

As Hassan has observed, to make our uninhabitable world accommodate us once more, human consciousness must undergo a "radical transformation" (The Literature of Silence 201). We have to forget what we are in order to become what Mailer

calls "Hipsters", "psychic outlaws" (290). Both Fiedler and Hassan have suggested that we might become something which is no longer human.⁶ The process of transformation is a narcissistic retreat, in self-defense, from our own humanity. Nathan A. Scott has interpreted Mailer's view of this retreat:

In a bad world, in a totalitarian (or partially totalitarian) world, where all the pressures of a technocratic society are calculated to obliterate any sense of the sanctity of the private self, the Hipster is the man who has the courage to step outside the conventional orders of life and give his fealty to the "incandescent consciousness" that he carries within himself of the myriad possibilities of human fulfillment contained within his own selfhood. And thus to the herd mentality of a mass culture he will appear to be a psychopath.... (47).

Hassan describes this process as "the self in recoil," and draws illustrations from twentieth-century literature: Kafka's Gregor Samsa and Dostoyevsky's hero in Notes From Underground metamorphosing themselves into insects. This "recoil" he explains as our way of

taking a stand. The retreat weakens [the involvement of the self] in the living world. It leads it in the ways of violence and alienation . . . and affords it no objective standard for evaluating the worth of

human action. But living in the world exclusively, living in what Ortega Y Gasset has called the Other, is also brutish and deadening. Complete immersion in the otherness of things is a ghastlier form of alienation: it is alienation from the self. "Without a strategic retreat into the self," Ortega rightly notes, "without vigilant thought, human life is impossible." It is precisely in fear of the Other--total loss of selfhood--that the modern conscience has fallen back on its internal resources (Radical Innocence 31).

What Hassan calls "the self in recoil", Sugerman calls a narcissistic "descent into nonbeing" (Sin and Madness 29). "Self-encapsulation or self-enclosure, the apparent self-idolatry of the narcissist, is essentially a defensive maneuver in the face of an overwhelming sense of worthlessness," Sugerman explains (26).

✓ As "mutants" and "psychic outlaws" endowed with the new sensibility, we will have a very different concept of what is permissible, appropriate behaviour. Mailer says that

the psychopathic element of Hip . . . has almost no interest in viewing human nature, or better, in judging human nature, from a set of standards conceived a priori to the experience . . . Hip abdicates from any conventional moral responsibility because it would argue that the result of our actions

(sic) are unforeseeable, and so we cannot know if we do good or bad

Therefore, men are not seen as good or bad . . . but rather each man is glimpsed as a collection of possibilities, some more possible than others . . . and some humans are considered more capable than others of reaching more possibilities within themselves in less time (289).

The main premise of the postmodern philosophy of survival is that all means of self-preservation are permissible. John Hawkes, often regarded as a postmodern writer, would seem to adhere to this premise: asked by John Keuhl whether "it is a positive value . . . simply to survive," he answered, "To keep living is the point." When Keuhl asked him if this meant "living morally or amorally" he replied, "Any way at all. Faulkner's 'enduring' posits a moral courage, a moral stance that is unfamiliar to me" (169). According to postmodernists, neither moral nor legal considerations should interfere with our desire to survive: postmodernism is prepared to disregard "the price [of that survival] in individual violence" since it believes "individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State" (Mailer 290). Postmodernism offers us possibilities for survival which are, indeed, radical, but as Hassan has wryly observed, "the self in recoil cannot afford to be choosy" (Radical Innocence 25).

Having no regard for the law or morality, postmodernists

propose that to survive in the wasteland, we become highly trained combatants, professional assassins. In our postmodern society, Bernard Goetz finds many supporters who agree with his argument that he has a right to carry a gun, and kill anyone who threatens him. The Guardian Angels urge all private citizens to master the art of self-defence, and even in Canada, where terrorism is not yet a significant problem, persons such as the chauffeur for the minister of Environment Canada, a pilot "who says he carries a gun in the cockpit of his Boeing 737", and a Toronto businessman "who rents bomb-sniffing dogs" graduate from institutes that train them to deal with snipers, kidnappers and explosives ("Fighting Terror", The Citizen, H1-2). Contemporary fiction focusses on the postmodern obsession with the art of self-defense. Burroughs introduces us to training camps where youths are taught to be terrorists. Burgess and Grass imagine a society in which safety is to be found in belonging to a gang of expert street-fighters.⁷

Those who possess the new sensibility believe that if we must live in a world where the terrorist has free reign, then ideally, we should be armed not just with weapons, but with special abilities we do not have now, abilities such as Burroughs endows his characters with: the power to assume invisibility, to travel through time, to read and control the minds of others, to respond with complete indifference to atrocity. The strategy of the psychic outlaw is to become incapable of feeling: anesthetized, he is spared all the painful emotions we suffer living in a wasteland -- boredom,

anxiety, jealousy, rage, and especially nausea and horror.⁸ Certain characters in contemporary literature exemplify this detached state the new sensibility strives for. Robert Coover's Paul, in "A Pedestrian Accident", is run over repeatedly by a moving van, but as he lies dying under the vehicle, he is completely unaffected by the pain he must be feeling, and narrates his own story with the detachment of an omniscient narrator. In Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow the child Slothrop pulls from the ruins of her bombed house seems oblivious to her injuries. "Got any gum, chum," she asks her rescuers, quite unappalled. But a more dramatic example is Burroughs' Johnnie who displays no alarm when he is chosen to be tortured, not because he is stoical, but because he is incapable of feeling fear. Nor is he able to feel pain: he laughs as he hangs in the torture device.⁹

To achieve such an immunity, we would have to cease to hold values: if nothing mattered to us, we could not be hurt.¹⁰ Much contemporary fiction reflects this attitude, suggesting that its characters are debilitated or destroyed by their values. In One Hundred Years of Solitude Márquez gives us the appalling picture of the desperation Rebecca is driven to trying to find a substitute for the value she places on stable loving relations: after she has lost her parents, and been prevented from marrying her fiancé, she eats lime and dirt, a subconscious act of transferral. Bainbridge's Anne, in Sweet William is devastated because she expects commitment from her promiscuous bisexual lover. In

John Irving's The World According to Garp, infidelity shatters family relations to such a degree that the damage is almost irreparable.¹¹

The values we invest human relations with are, according to the new sensibility, the most risky and costly of all our values, and therefore, the ones we must dispense with the soonest. In Beyond Monogamy: Recent Studies of Alternatives in Marriage, James R. Smith and Lynn G. Smith voice the postmodern belief that we must dispense with the values we have traditionally invested human relations with, calling for relations that are not "regimented around the needs for subsistence, safety and security" (10). According to the new sensibility, in relationships based on love, commitment, support and sacrifice, an unhealthy dependency exists, so that loved ones consume us with their demands, while we allow ourselves to become vulnerable, relying on them instead of ourselves to confirm our identity. Sugerman documents this postmodern attitude, which she feels is becoming widespread, in Sin and Madness. She detects in our society a growing tendency to view human relations with distrust and fear. We are threatened, she says, "by the possibility of engulfment, by being absorbed by another, in dread that [we] may lose [our] identity in relationship. To preserve [ourselves] under pressure, [our] defense is isolation" (47-48). To keep our identity intact, nothing is more important, postmodernism feels, than self-reliance: Mailer argues that given the world we must live in, "the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger,

to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (277).

Believing self-reliance is crucial to survival, postmodernists argue that relationships should be meaningless--sterile, short-lived, promiscuous, and formed for but one purpose, to gratify a brief sexual urge.¹² Lasch, in The Culture of Narcissism, documents this postmodern definition of human relations, quoting Jerry Rubin, self-appointed spokesman of his age. Rubin congratulates himself for having learned to detach himself emotionally from others, overcoming his "addiction to love", learning to "love [himself] enough so that he [did] not need another to make [him] happy", and learning to put sex "in its proper place" and to enjoy it without investing it with "symbolic " meaning (44, 45).

The new sensibility is convinced that sexual fulfillment will bring us the contentment we mistakenly expect love to provide us with. As Howe puts it, for the postmodernist, "sexuality is the ground of being" (253). Scott, discussing Mailer's concept of "hipster", describes the same attitude: the hipster "conceives the power of his orgasm to be the great clue to how well he is living" (48). Contemporary fiction voices this aspect of the new sensibility: it is what Amado argues in his characterization of Dona Flor, who, in her second marriage, has security and love, but almost ceases to exist because her new husband cannot satisfy her sexually.

In the fiction of Burroughs we find a model of what postmodernism deems the ideal relationship: women and children are conspicuously absent because they are perceived as dependent, and therefore, undesirable. There is a certain type of child presented as admissible: the boy who has reached puberty, and is so self-sufficient that he can survive without parents, and who gratifies the sexual needs of others, rather than demanding that his own needs be met. But in Burroughs' world there is no way that a relation with a woman might be desirable. Women, not just in his, but in other fiction exploring postmodern concerns, are depicted as consuming, castrating sirens who devour loved ones with emotional demands too enormous to fulfill.

Postmodernism advocates both the promiscuous homosexual relation and the triad. According to the new sensibility, the homosexual relation is ideal because it allows those who enter into it to remain emotionally detached, independent, and therefore, invulnerable. Burroughs' fiction provides us with an illustration of this argument for homosexuality. The postmodern argument for the triangle is that ideally those in such a relation do not experience jealousy, because they are not emotionally involved, and do not desire an emotional commitment from their partners. Having two lovers instead of one seems less threatening, because the difficulty of satisfying, and of being satisfied, is not faced alone. Finally, the new sensibility regards the triangle as an ideal situation because its members, to enter such a relation, have necessarily overcome sexual inhibitions mass society views as

unhealthy. The triad is depicted as an ideal solution in such novels as Drabble's The Middle Ground and Amado's Doná Flor's Two Husbands.¹³

As we struggle to survive in the wasteland, we will be hindered by our inhibitions, the new sensibility believes. Postmodernists see inhibitions as the checks we impose upon ourselves whenever we find that our natural desire to pursue pleasure conflicts with the values we hold. We are wrong, postmodernists warn, to deny the instinct that urges us to seek pleasure, because it is a survival instinct. This is why Mailer can go so far even as to say that in the pursuit of pleasure, the hipster may permit himself to murder (284). Lasch observed this postmodern rejection of inhibitions in his study of attitudes in the seventies: he documents a society concerned with "overcoming the 'fear of pleasure'" and reversing "'the negative programming of childhood'", the "'puritan conditioning'" (The Culture of Narcissism 29, 46, 44). Howe has also described this attitude toward pleasure and inhibitions:

The new sensibility posits a theory that might be called the psychology of unobstructed need: men should satisfy those needs which are theirs, organic to their bodies and psyches, and to do this they must now learn to discard or destroy all those obstructions, mostly the result of cultural neurosis, which keep them from satisfying their needs (253).

Mailer, too, has explained the postmodernist's argument that we cannot afford to be inhibited: "the psychopath knows instinctively that to express a forbidden impulse actively is far more beneficial for him than merely to confess the desire in the safety of a doctor's room" (283).

It is through pleasure, postmodernism explains, that we will transcend our horror and nausea in the anarchic world which is coming. A violent, absurd world need not present itself as a hell to us if we know how to find pleasure there. Burroughs' characters again provide us with an illustration: they should be mad with horror and nausea, living in the world they do, but instead they retain their sanity, their dignity, and their desire to live because, having learned to indulge in pleasure, hell seems to them to be Utopia.

It is especially sexual inhibitions that the postmodernist feels we must overcome. This is why, in postmodern fiction, the turning point often occurs when a character decides to indulge sexual desires he has been denying. Amado's Dona Flor, for example, is delivered from her schizophrenic condition when she lets her sexuality override her notions of respectability. For many of Iris Murdoch's characters, an existence which had seemed unbearable becomes worthwhile when they finally overcome inhibitions which had prevented them from finding a happiness they could know only in a homosexual relationship.

We have said that to follow postmodernism's prescription, ridding ourselves of inhibitions and divesting ourselves of values, we would have to undergo a drastic

transformation. Many contemporary writers have given us a description of the psychological processes we would have to go through. The characters depicted in these novels and short stories achieve a remarkable detachment from themselves, often referring to themselves in the third person, regarding their own suffering as though it were the pain of someone else. They regard that pain, moreover, as enjoyable and amusing, regarding themselves from a distance with the attitude of both a sadist and a joker. Sadism is a defence mechanism that allows them to enjoy what would normally cause them painful horror and disgust, and in a similar way, joking allows them to translate the painfully atrocious into the harmlessly comic. The joker's strategy is to disconnect word from world: the language the joker uses does not refer to anything that actually exists. Burroughs' narrator in "Who Am I To Be Critical?" keeps himself from feeling guilt and nausea by creating a short circuit between language and reality when he calls the tortures and assassinations he has had a part in a "fun fest" (The Soft Machine 24). Alex, in A Clockwork Orange, has created a language of his own which protects him by having no reference to the reality he cannot afford to acknowledge--that his victims are humans, not inanimate, insensible objects. We can see all three of these defence mechanisms--detachment from the self, sadism, and joking--exercised by Alex in his account of the savage beating he receives after he is released from the institution, and by Oskar, in Grass's

The Tin Drum when he describes how neighbourhood children forced him to drink a soup of urine, frogs and powdered brick.

When Alex is giving his account, because he cannot allow himself to be perturbed by his pain, he refuses to feel self-interest or self-pity. He sneers about what happened to him, taking the point of view of a cruel onlooker: "I cried for myself boo hoo hoo." He uses the language of the joker whenever he refers to his injuries: "tolchocked" savagely on the "litso", he cannot stand up, and lies helplessly, "fagged and shagged." When he cannot bring himself to regard his suffering as amusing, he makes himself view it as uninteresting, focussing not on the horror of the incident, but on trivial, irrelevant details. "It was cold," he reports, "but I was not feeling the cold," bypassing the fact that what he was feeling was pain. To avoid having to discuss his agony, instead of describing himself lying on the ground, too hurt to get up, he painstakingly reconstructs the scene of his assailants leaving him:

Then they dusted their rookers and put back on their shlems and tunics which they had taken off, and then they got back into the auto The driver finished the page he was reading and put his book away, then he started the auto and they went off townwards, my ex-droog and my ex-enemy waving" (118).

Oskar, in The Tin Drum speaks of his suffering in the same manner as Alex, partly detached, partly amused. He

refers to himself not as "I" but as "Oskar", and his tone is not one of self-pity or horror, but cruel sarcasm. "Only when my friends who had been so concerned about my diet had left me, because Nuchi had been sick in the soup, did I crawl into a corner. . . and throw up the few spoonfuls of reddish brew, in which I was surprised to find no vestiges of frogs" (99).

Like Alex, when Oskar is not joking about his pain and horror, he appears oblivious to it, describing the outrage as though it were some banal, domestic incident. "Like a good housewife," he tells us, "she stirred slowly, testing the resistance of the mash, blew on the full spoon to cool it" (99). He spends more time describing the sheets drying in the loft where he has been attacked than he spends recounting the attack itself.

These are the survival tactics, then, which postmodernism would have us practice: we must become totally self-reliant, heavily armed, utterly indifferent to atrocity, or else amused by it.¹⁴ Burroughs has given us a model of the postmodern man who has mastered these tactics and is therefore perfectly equipped to survive anarchy: Captain Strobe of Cities of the Red Night.¹⁵ Although the Captain lives in a world far more hellish than the one we find ourselves in, he does not allow himself to be terrorized, and he refuses to be anguished by the atrocities he must confront everywhere. Being both an expert killer, and a creature incapable of feeling, he can be dignified, beautiful, free

and content in a world Beckett thought would reduce us to subhuman wretches prostrate with terror and despair. As the mark of the noose around his neck attests, Strobe is immune to death itself--there is no physical danger he need fear. Nor can he be hurt psychologically, having learned to translate a moral response to atrocity into one which is merely aesthetic, and therefore, far less painful. Confronted with the horror of a city gone mad, people being tortured and hanged all about him, Captain Strobe is not devastated by nausea, but is simply contemptuous, his aristocratic sensibilities offended. Complaining that the scene is "loutish", he and his men depart for more tasteful surroundings.

Substituting aesthetics for morality, Strobe can cope with his nightmare world, but as Burroughs is aware, he has not succeeded completely in divesting himself of values, but has merely exchanged one set of values for another. Burroughs acknowledges that Strobe's aesthetic values are a weakness, but we are to forgive him, apparently, because his psychological immunity is lessened only slightly because he holds these values. They cause him a certain amount of inconvenience--he cannot enjoy himself in the city of Ba'dan while the hangings are taking place--but that is all. And we are even more inclined to excuse Strobe his weakness when his men assure us that his sense of aesthetics makes him charming.

Most of Burroughs' characters lack the Captain's refinement, and therefore cannot make use of his strategy of

substituting aesthetics for morality, but one postmodern tactic they all defend themselves with is the pursuit of pleasure. Burroughs, once seriously addicted to drugs, has appreciated what many postmodernists do not seem to take into account: that the pursuit of pleasure is a strategy that will backfire on anyone who does not know how to use it. An expert like Strobe realizes that one has to learn how to indulge in pleasure without letting such indulgence become a dependency. Burroughs' characters run the risk of substituting one set of dangerous values for another: it is no use their learning to live without love, security and stability if they learn to depend on pleasure instead. The two main sources of pleasure in Burroughs' works are drugs and sex, and they are also the most dangerous sources of addiction. It is with contempt that the drug addicts and the sex-crazed are regarded in his works. Professional survivors in Burroughs' world know precisely what amount of opium they can take without becoming addicted, and they put novices on training schedules to teach them to take drugs safely. Similarly, they know how to concoct antidotes to keep their sex drives under control, and they are careful to gratify their sexual urges immediately and automatically, since it is deprivation which creates in them dangerous insatiable appetites.

To summarize, then, Captain Strobe represents the new sensibility idealized: he is the embodiment of the postmodern philosophy of survival defined here by Scott, interpreting Mailer: "we must 'open the limits of the possible' --not by

fleeing from the abyss but by confronting it, not by making any pact with the attenuated, mechanized, hygienic world of modern technocracy but by boldly entering into 'the mysteries of murder, suicide, incest, orgy, orgasm and Time'" (50).

Sociologists such as Lasch and Sugerman, cultural spokesmen like Fiedler and Mailer, literary critics such as Howe, Graff and Hassan, and novelists such as Burroughs, Pynchon and Vonnegut have equipped us with a comprehensive definition of the new sensibility. Nevertheless, Howe's proposal that postmodern works be studied as a response to mass society and the new sensibility has been ignored by many critics. Gerald Graff complained of this in 1979, denouncing critics for not studying postmodern literature in a cultural context. "The assumption that the theoretical understanding of society is a prerequisite of novel-writing offends their axioms about the nature of literature" he explained (Literature Against Itself 215). Convinced that Howe's approach to postmodern fiction is sound, Graff studied contemporary works in a cultural context to arrive at this thesis:

If the novel has been floundering in the postwar decades (and I believe it has been), one reason may be that novelists have simply not had much of importance to say about the way we live now, a deficiency which cannot be indefinitely concealed by the theory that fiction has no obligation to offer such statements. If this deficiency exists, then one reason for it may

be that in the kind of mass society which has grown up in the last three decades, our personal relationships, public values, and the connections between the two have become so disoriented, scrambled, and confused that writers, as well as everyone else, have found it peculiarly difficult to arrive at clear, coherent, and convincing generalities ("Babbitt at the Abyss: The Social Context of Postmodern Fiction" 307).

It is in this contemporary cultural context that I propose to examine the works of four Canadian writers who are considered to be postmodern-- Jack Hodgins, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje and Audrey Thomas-- because their work reflects thematically the moral disorientation Howe and Graff see as characteristic of mass society, and because the technical innovations these writers have discovered seem to be an attempt to overcome the difficulties that moral disorientation has caused postmodern writers generally.

Howe's approach is not the only way to study the works of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas as "postmodern": the focus of a number of critics analyzing their works has been not the cultural context of postmodernism, but postmodern literary theory.¹⁶

George Bowering sees the four as postmodern because their work is a reaction against realism (The Mask in Place 76, 78). The postmodern novelist, he says,

will not spend his time building a character you can pretend is someone else. He is more likely to produce

linguistic activity & allow you to feel as if you have attended the action of the person the story is 'about.' Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter, through which one has to wander to hear that the main character Buddy Boldon (sic) was here a few moments ago, is such a book ("The Painted Window: Notes on Post-Realist Fiction" 118).

It is from a similar perspective that P.L. Surette regards Kroetsch as a postmodern writer, a "fabulist" who has rejected the modern terms of realism ("The Fabular Fiction of Robert Kroetsch"). And it is in this sense that Kroetsch perceives his own work as postmodern: when asked what the postmodern writer Marquez taught him, he answered, "He nips at the heels of realism and makes the old cow dance" (Interview with Hancock 38).¹⁷

But Kroetsch's definition of "postmodern" includes other terms: it is "the apocalypse of speech, the naming of the world's end," and it is in this context that he sees Jack Hodgins as a postmodern writer ("The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction" 59). He has interpreted the works of Audrey Thomas and Michael Ondaatje as postmodern in slightly different terms, commending them as writers who do "violence to narrative expectation" (61). He has described his own writing process this way: "my destruction takes the form of trying to make an old story work, for instance having almost to destroy the old story to tell it anew" ("Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with

Robert Kroetsch" 28). It is this interest Kroetsch has in anti-story that makes Robert Lecker see him as postmodern ("Freed From Story: Narrative Tactics in Badlands").

Several critics have found it fruitful to bring to the works of Ondaatje and Kroetsch the postmodern concern of how word and world relate. John Moss, in "Himmler's Got the King: An Essay on Badlands and Burning Water," observes that "in this sudden age of ours, which we sometimes call postmodern, it is . . . inevitable, perhaps, that the desire to be, through language, should be contained in a narrative design which not so much refutes or ridicules the existential quest as incorporates it into a more elastic and exacting vision" (252). Ina Ferris treats Ondaatje as an "illuminating . . . case of the postmodern writer who characteristically searches for but distrusts narrative structures, who seeks to connect words and world but remains unsure of either term or of whether they are in fact two terms at all" ("Michael Ondaatje and the Turn to Narrative" 74). Postmodern literary theory posits that language is not referential, that narrative is solipsistic, and does not address a reality beyond itself. Louis MacKendrick has studied Kroetsch's work as a reflection of this postmodern theory. Kroetsch's novels, he argues, are conscious of themselves as fiction. He quotes Kroetsch as saying "I'm interested in sharing with the reader the fact that I'm making a fiction. One of the assumptions of old style realism is that the novel isn't fiction. Verisimilitude, the

textbooks demand. And I'm no longer interested in that. I want the reader to be engaged with me in fiction making" ("Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion" 18). L. Ricou has observed that this kind of response Kroetsch wants from his reader is postmodern: "Consistent with his post-modernist sympathies," he says, "Kroetsch is relying on the reader to complete the composition...." ("Field Notes and Notes in a Field: Forms of the West in Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins" 120). Like MacKendrick and Ricou, Sherill E. Grace, in "Wastelands and Badlands: The Legacies of Pynchon and Kroetsch," examines Kroetsch's concern with whether or not word and world actually relate. But she does not arrive at the same conclusion they do: she argues that Kroetsch, unlike most postmodern writers, is confident that language can portray reality. She contrasts him with the postmodern novelist Thomas Pynchon to emphasize her point. She sees Kroetsch as using language "to break free from, or de-create, the prisons of inherited words or stories in order to discover a fresh reality that expresses us better than the inherited one" (23).

Other critics consider Kroetsch postmodern because he explores John Barth's theory of the novel of exhaustion: MacKendrick, Brian L. Ross and Geert Lernout have examined Kroetsch's novels from this perspective. By "novel of exhaustion" Barth means fiction that explores all possible meanings rather than addressing a single meaning. Robert Lecker sees Kroetsch as being interested in the "play of

possible meanings" ("Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetics" 124). "He emphasizes the need for texts to remain open-ended and dialectically free. Consequently he supports those Post-Modern narrative forms which resist closure and explore the tensions between extremes. His attempt to defy the 'tyranny of narrative' (The Crow Journals 67) also explains his involvement as co-editor of a journal of Post-Modern aesthetics significantly entitled boundary 2" (128).

Peter Thomas, who has produced some of the best criticism we have of Kroetsch's work, has made his concern Michael Holquist's premise, that postmodern art is anti-mythical ("Whodunit and Other Questions"). "It is perhaps axiomatic to the Post-Modernist position that we exist in a world of conditional assent, of hypothesis and contingency. That being so, familiar myths must be decreed. . . The movement of Kroetsch's writing has been away from the ordered mythopoeic world view...." (Robert Kroetsch 7). In his conclusion to Robert Kroetsch, Thomas raises questions about reducing the quest for love "down to a pitiful crawl back into the womb and a matter of shit and silence" (115): his concern here may seem to be with the moral disorientation Graff and Howe propose as a focus for the analysis of postmodern fiction, but in fact, he is exploring the effects of such an extreme vision on the "aesthetic virtues" of the novel (115).

While the approaches of these critics have afforded very

worthwhile criticism, there is still a need to explore the works of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas in the context of postmodern culture. All four authors are experimenting with postmodern literary theory, and it is important that this be taken into account in any study of their work, but as well as questions about narcissistic narrative, the nature of language, and the acts of writing and reading, these authors are asking urgent questions about morality, and we must have criticism that assesses the degree of their success in handling these questions as well. According to Hassan, because the radical beliefs of postmodernism might be a threat to our humanity, writers and critics must understand the implications postmodernism has not only as a literary movement, but as "the destiny of man" (The Literature of Silence, Epilogue 201). "What the world faces ultimately depends on man's response to the destructive elements in his experience," he warns us (Radical Innocence 20). Accordingly, this thesis will evaluate the works of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas as imaginative responses to a world made uninhabitable by violence.

Notes

¹ Richard E. Palmer refers to postmodern thought as "radical" in his essay "Postmodernity and Hermeneutics" (364). Ihab Hassan uses the adjective "radical" throughout his work Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary Novel, and Gerald Graff says postmodern thought is seen as radical, in his essay "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough" (384).

² Hassan says postmodernism might be a "mutation of Western humanism" ("The Question of Postmodernism" 122). Graff explains that postmodernism can be seen as a reaction against "bourgeois-rationalist-humanist tradition" (404), and Palmer has described postmodernity as "[a calling] into question the heritage of humanistic rationality, the humanistic view of the world, the humanistic concept of the status of man in the cosmos" (365).

³ Mailer claims that the Negro has always had a postmodern or what he calls "hip" view of the world, and therefore has always perceived life as "war, and nothing but war." Graff has documented this postmodern notion that we exist in a war zone: postmodernists "presuppose an external world that is so irrational, menacing, and unmanageable that the private self becomes the only area of experience subject to one's control" ("Babbitt at the Abyss" 318). Unlike Mailer, neither Graff nor Lasch, who has also detected in

postmodern society the attitude that the world is dangerous, feels this perception is objective. Lasch explains that it is more a "projection of inner anxieties [than] a perception of the way things are" (The Culture of Narcissism 103). "The perception of the world as a dangerous and forbidding place," he explains, "though it originates in a realistic awareness of the insecurity of contemporary social life, receives reinforcement from the narcissistic projection of aggressive impulses outward" (102).

4 The new sensibility has been documented by sociologists, whose accounts I will draw from to formulate a definition, but, as Hassan and Lasch have observed, much contemporary literature reflects the new sensibility, and I will refer to several novels which help illustrate my definition (Hassan, Radical Innocence 20, Lasch, Haven in a Heartless World : The Family Beseiged 176).

5 Lee refers to this as "world's desperate project of conquest and self-sufficiency" (20).

6 Fiedler calls those whom he sees as already having undergone the transformation "the new mutants", and Hassan understands the transformation to be a "breakdown of the

human form" ("The New Mutants" 383, Radical Innocence 20).

7 To understand both postmodernism and the works of Burgess, Grass and Burroughs, it is important to determine here what attitude these writers have toward the postmodern premise that to survive we must become professional combattants. While Grass and Burgess satirize the notion, Burroughs regards it ambivalently, sometimes satirizing, but sometimes idealizing, the patrol teams and training camps depicted in his work.

There is no mistaking the authorial irony in this description of Alex's gang:

The four of us were dressed in the height of fashion, which in those days was a pair of black very tight tights with the old jelly mould, as we called it, fitting on the crotch underneath the tights, this being to protect and also a sort of design you could viddy clear enough in a certain light so that I had one in the shape of a spider, Pete had a rooker (a hand, that is), Georgie had a very fancy one of a flower, and poor old Dim had a very hound-and-horny one of a clown's litso (face, that is), Dim not ever having much of an idea of things and being, beyond all shadow of a doubting thomas, the dimmest of we four. (A Clockwork Orange 5-6).

Now in those days, my brothers, the teaming up was mostly by fours or fives, these being like auto-teams, four being a comfy number for an auto, and six being the outside limit for gang-size. Sometimes gangs would gang up so as to make like malenky armies for big night-war, but mostly it was best to roam in these like small numbers (15).

Like Burgess, Grass ridicules the idea of "ganging-up" to defend ourselves in a dangerous world. He presents the "Dusters" in The Tin Drum as clowns whose armed aggression is a mindless response to a threatening world. "We have nothing to do with parties", they tell Oskar, "Our fight is against our parents and all other grownups, regardless of what they may be for or against" (374). The Dusters do not represent a postmodern fantasy we might console ourselves with; we are horrified by the possibility they stand for--mankind devoted to committing atrocity because it has decided that in a violent world, it is "against everything."

Burroughs, unlike Grass and Burgess, idealizes in his work the postmodern argument that we must fight violence with violence, arming ourselves against terrorism. His Wild Boys, unlike the Dusters and Alex's gang, represent a model for survival. The description of their headquarters, in Port of Saints, is a glorification of self-defense:

There are about thirty boys here of all races and nationalities: Negroes, Chinese, Mexicans, Arabs, Danes, Swedes, Americans, English. That is, they are evidently derived from racial and national stock corresponding to Negroes, Mexicans, Danes, Americans et cetera. However, these boys are a new breed.

After a breakfast of bread and tea, six boys put on jock straps, crash helmets and skates and buckled on their knives in preparation for reconnaissance patrol. The blond boy with the machine pistol will accompany them as patrol leader. Others are busy at the work benches, sharpening knives, oiling skates, fixing bicycles, improvising weapons. One weapon works on the crossbow principle with strong rubber bands instead of a bow. Lead slugs are fed in from a magazine on top of the weapon and drop into a slot when the gun is cocked by pulling the bands back. The rifle models are amazingly accurate up to twenty yards . . . A murderous bolo is made by attaching lead weights to each end of a bicycle chain. The boys practice continually with these devices (71).

In the poetic descriptions we are given of the Wild Boys in battle winning the world back from terrorists, violence becomes an act of beauty as Burroughs idealizes the possibility postmodernism invites us to investigate of making our world habitable once more by fighting violence with

violence:

Glider boys drift down from the sunset on red wings and rain arrows from the sky. Slingshot boys glide in across a valley riding their black plastic wings like sheets of mica in the sunlight torn clothes flapping hard red flesh. Each boy carries a heavy slingshot attached to his wrist by a leather thong. At their belts are leather pouches of round black stones.

The roller-skate boys sweep down a hill in a shower of autumn leaves. They slice through a police patrol. Blood spatters leaves in air ("The Wild Boys Smile" in The Soft Machine, Nova Express, The Wild Boys: Three Novels by William S. Burroughs 184).

¹⁸ In The Culture of Narcissism, in the chapter "The Flight from Feeling" Lasch has documented that in the seventies, this attitude was held widely. Fiedler also noted it, and uses the words "disconnection" and "detachment" to describe the new mutants and their relation to others. Sugerman demonstrates that postmodern society, preoccupied with self-preservation, has taught itself the narcissistic strategy of insentience. She quotes Kierkegaard, who explains that the narcissist "suffers from . . . a derangement of feeling, the derangement consisting in (sic)

his not having any" (Sin and Madness 45).

9 While these three writers endow their characters with the postmodern ability to immunize themselves to pain, they do not necessarily approve of this immunity. Coover is not presenting Paul to us as a model survivor. Rather, Paul represents what Coover warns us we might become. We are not meant to identify with Paul, and console ourselves with his immunity to pain--Coover depicts Paul's indifference to pain comically to keep us detached from him. He has explained that a comic vision thwarts our attempts to reconcile ourselves to what we should protest against, but find it easier to accept. To Coover, such acceptance is ignoble and "adolescent." He objects to tragedy as a vision which allows us to accommodate ourselves to what he feels we must resist, and explains that he presents a comic vision in his work to force the reader to protest (Hertzel 28).

Similarly, Pynchon treats the idea of immunity to pain and horror comically, deploring rather than applauding the postmodern prescription for survival. We find V. disgusting and contemptible for having achieved this immunity.

Burroughs' response to the postmodern notion that we immunize ourselves to pain is much more complicated than Pynchon's or Coover's, because while he agrees that we cannot afford to dehumanize ourselves by acquiring such an immunity, he argues that we have no choice but to avail ourselves of that immunity. "A rabid dog cannot choose but bite," he

reasons (The Naked Lunch 3). He regards existence as unbearable, and sees the use of drugs as absolutely necessary for survival--in his "Letter From a Master Addict to Dangerous Drugs" he does not attempt to dissuade others from using drugs, but pleads with the medical profession to invent a nonaddictive drug, since it is inconceivable to him that we can endure our world without a drug that enables to us to transcend our suffering and live "in a painless, sexless, timeless state" ("Letter From a Master Addict to Dangerous Drugs," in The Naked Lunch 245).

10 Mailer has said that the Hipster is necessarily divorced from his values (290).

11 While these writers concur with the new sensibility that our values can cause us considerable suffering, they are not recommending, as mass society does, that we therefore dispense with values. Instead, the suffering depicted in their works confirms the antithesis of postmodernism's argument: deprived of values, we cannot survive.

12 In Beyond Monogamy we find this postmodern attitude voiced: Alex Comfort and the Smiths advocate that the sexual

act be dissociated completely from the idea of emotional commitment. We can also find the postmodern view of sexuality documented by Fiedler: for the new mutants, "physical release is the end of the sexual act" ("The New Mutants" 392-3).

¹³ While postmodernism affords Amado and Drabble with a solution, Burroughs is skeptical, and does not commit himself entirely to its philosophy. Again, we find that his attitude toward the ideals of the new sensibility is ambivalent. His fiction both applauds and deplores postmodernism's prescription for human relations. Burroughs' horror of being controlled makes him concur with the new sensibility that human relations are tyrannical and parasitic, that we are enslaved and manipulated by the sexually attractive, and consumed by those who depend on us. But while Burroughs is horrified by conventional human relations, he is equally appalled by the alternatives suggested by postmodernism: this accounts for his ambivalent treatment of homosexuality. In Cities of the Red Night he celebrates it as a relationship which allows us to retain our independence and our identity, and he defends our right to engage in forms of sexual activity that are conventionally regarded as immoral and illegal. In The Naked Lunch, however, he shows us that this relation has negative possibilities too. He depicts homosexuality in this work as both narcissistic and sado-masochistic, a dangerous form of self-indulgence culminating in the desire to abolish procreation,

and people the world instead with "replicas" of oneself.

¹⁴ While it is clear that neither Burgess nor Grass approves of these tactics, Burroughs' attitude is more difficult to determine. Burgess and Grass leave us with no doubt about how we are to respond to Alex and Oskar, but Burroughs makes us unsure of our response not just to Johnnie but to the characters who reappear in his works: Audrey Carsons, Kiki, John Hamelin, the Wild Boys. Perhaps this is because he himself feels ambivalent about what his characters represent, or perhaps because he is testing his reader's sense of ethics (he has claimed to be using the same strategy as Swift does in "A Modest Proposal"). We are horrified by Alex and Oskar, and detach ourselves from them in spite of their attempts to establish a comradery with us, Alex calling us "brothers", Oskar trying to ingratiate himself with self-deprecatory humour. We object to their assumption that we are like them, and regard atrocity with indifference and amusement. Our relation with Burroughs' characters, however, is unclear. Perhaps Audrey Carsons provides us with the most useful example here of the ambiguous response we have to Burroughs' characters. At times, we are encouraged to admire Carsons for his psychopathic immunity ~~to~~ horror: in Cities of the Red Night, for example, when he guns down the Special Police from the Council of the Selected: "They are crew-cut men in blue suits, looking like religious FBI men with muscular Christian smiles. 'What can we do for you?' 'Drop dead.' Audrey snaps. He draws his spark gun and gives them a full blast. They fall twitching and smoking" (177). But

Burroughs' tone changes drastically at other times, and he presents the characters we had understood to be heroes in the same critical light as Burgess presents Alex to us, and Grass, Oskar. Audrey Carsons is also Clem Snide, Private Asshole, a contemptible character whose attitude toward atrocity we find disgusting:

There I am outside the hotel room waiting for the correspondent to reach a crescendo of amorous noises. I always find that if you walk in just as he goes off he won't have time to disengage himself and take a swing at you. When me and the house dick open the door with a passkey, the smell of shit and bitter almonds blows us back into the hall. Seems they both took a cyanide capsule and fucked until the capsules dissolved. A real messy love death (35).

15 We detect Burroughs' ambivalence toward postmodern philosophy in his portrayal of Strobe. Protesting against what he sees as tyrannical in American society, Burroughs envisions a Utopian world based on the ideals of Captain Mission, an eighteenth-century outlaw who attempted to found a Republic that would guarantee every man complete freedom. Those ideals concur very closely with postmodern ideals. Captain Strobe, Burroughs explains, represents what Captain Mission could have been if he had not been murdered by natives before he was able to finish his work. Strobe's role in Cities of the Red Night is a heroic one, then--to liberate

the repressed and establish a truly "permissive" society. But Strobe represents some very terrifying possibilities too--Burroughs is fully aware of the sinister implications of the postmodern premise "all things are permissible." If everything is permitted, then atrocity must be tolerated: through the eyes of Noah Blake we begin to realize that Strobe is not a human being, and is capable of monstrous acts. "Up to this moment," Noah muses, growing suspicious of the Captain, "I have been so completely charmed by Strobe's nonchalance that I have never stopped to ask myself: What is the source of this poise? Where did he buy it, and what did he pay?" (98).

¹⁶ A notable exception is David L. Jeffrey, who has shown that many of the terms of postmodern criticism do not apply to Jack Hodgins. He argues that Hodgins cannot be seen as a "self-abandoned magic-realist" or a "jester-trickster deconstructing myth" (Jack Hodgins and His Work 13-19).^{*} Instead, Jeffrey puts Hodgins in quite a different postmodern context: "What the South Americans such as Fuentes, Marquez, Llosa, Amado, Asturias and Puig have in common with other writers on Hodgins' long list," he observes, "is their celebration of rural community, of folksy, humorous, often almost surrealistically cartooned world of human faiblesse and small happiness, a series of exquisite but quite local small tapestries on which high matters of a troubled world can be cast simply in a vernacular voice and colour" (Jack Hodgins and His Work 11).^{*}

* These page references are to a manuscript I read in its unpublished state. They will not necessarily correspond to the pages of Jack Hodgins and His Work which soon will be available, but which was not accessible to me at the time that I was preparing this dissertation.

¹⁷ Kroetsch has also referred to his work as "post-post-modern" (Interview with Geoff Hancock 36).

Coming to Chaos Neutral:

Michael Ondaatje's Response
to the Postmodern Philosophy of Survival

In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming Through Slaughter, and Running in the Family, Michael Ondaatje addresses the same problem postmodernists have concerned themselves with: how are we to inhabit a world so violent that the odds are against survival? The long lists of casualties that appear in all three of these works emphasize the urgency of the problem: in Ondaatje's world, the threat of violent death is real and immediate. In The Collected Works, Billy the Kid observes that violence takes a heavy toll--of the 400 buried in Boot Hill Cemetery, less than a hundred died of natural causes (9). In both Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family the roll is read for those who have died violently during the Jazz Age: Buddy Bolden lists the names of all the musicians who, like himself, have "gone over barbed wire", and in Running in the Family, a tally is taken to determine how many died of alcoholism, reckless behaviour, and suicide (Coming Through Slaughter 95, Running in the Family 40-1).

Although Ondaatje's characters frequently mistake nature as the source of the violence threatening them--Pat Garrett feels that even flowers are menacing him--the danger lies within themselves, actually, in the form of irrational impulses which drive them to destroy their ordered world.¹

Because these impulses are unpredictable and impossible to control, there can be no stability or harmony in the lives of Ondaatje's characters. They make for themselves a lawless, hostile world in which all men are at war with each other, and every man is at war with himself. They cannot explain why they are overwhelmed by rage which they direct first at others, but then back upon themselves. Unable to prevent irrational outbursts of violence, they can only arm themselves against assault.²

We recognize as postmodern the strategies of self-preservation Ondaatje's characters use to defend themselves against the violent outbursts of others, and the hatred they direct suicidally against themselves. Like the postmodern survivor, they defend themselves against immediate physical danger by taking the law into their own hands, by learning to anticipate an attack, and by training to be expert killers. To defend themselves against psychological trauma, living in a world where they must witness and commit atrocities, they again follow the postmodern prescription for survival by learning to immerse themselves in the pursuit of pleasure, by guarding themselves against emotional involvement with others, by creating internal realities so that they may retreat from the world, and by learning to substitute unfeeling reflexes for painful emotional response.

Because there is no recognized authority in the

world Ondaatje depicts, anyone attempting to enforce law and order must do so by violent means.³ In the frontier world of The Collected Works, it is not a contradiction that the sheriff should be a former outlaw, since only a man expert in practicing violence could impose authority. The same holds true in the underworld of New Orleans depicted in Coming Through Slaughter. Just as the pimps must beat the prostitutes to enforce their laws, Bolden has no means but violent ones for establishing his authority when he suspects that Nora is involved with Pickett, because in his permissive and anarchic society, he has neither legal rights nor moral claims to her fidelity. The situation is similar in Running in the Family: in the anarchic country of Ceylon, where, because the British exercise authority in theory but not in practice, Mervyn Ondaatje must resort to terrorism to police and protect his people.

In a world where the threat of violent death is constant, Ondaatje's characters cannot relax their defensive stance for a moment. Tom O'Folliard never stops moving, anticipating at every second that he will be shot at: "His feet danced with energy. On a horse he did tricks all the time, somersaulting, lying back. He was riddled with energy. He walked, both arms crooked over a rifle at the elbows. Legs always swinging extra" (51). Billy the Kid perhaps exemplifies most dramatically this mechanical anticipation of danger: without even being conscious of it, his gun hand moves unceasingly, going through the motion of drawing and

shooting. Pat Garrett tells us "he said he did finger exercises subconsciously, on the average 12 hours a day. And it was true. From then on I noticed his left hand churning within itself, each finger circling alternately like a train wheel" (43).

There is only one alternative to armed aggression in Ondaatje's world, and it is a desperate one: those who cannot use violence to defend themselves might survive by submitting to atrocity until it spends itself. As Bolden realizes, observing the mattress whores of New Orleans, at a certain point, those subjected to atrocity can be victimized no further--there is no violence left that the pimps can inflict upon the diseased prostitutes. Those like the mattress whores who can no longer serve as victims need not concern themselves with self-defense.

We recognize the postmodern response to violence, then, in the efforts Ondaatje's characters make to arm themselves and train themselves as professional killers. But what strikes us as even more postmodern are the narcissistic strategies of self-defense they avail themselves of to make themselves not just physically but mentally invulnerable to terrorism. We recall that postmodernism defines family relations as a form of terrorism, family members holding one another as emotional hostages. We have seen that postmodernists believe we must keep ourselves emotionally detached from family members to keep ourselves from being victimized in family relations. Ondaatje's characters are postmodern, then, in their treatment of loved ones whom they see as a

threat. Billy the Kid thinks of Angie as a mouth that will devour him (64). Her love "cripples" and "paralyzes" him, leaving him vulnerable in a dangerous world: "later my hands cracked in love juice/ fingers paralysed by it arthritic/ these beautiful fingers I couldnt move/ faster than a crippled witch now" (16). To protect himself from what he sees as a risky emotional involvement, he attempts to distance himself from Angie by covering her face when he makes love to her, and by holding over her head the possibility--threatening to Angie, consoling to him--of becoming sexually involved with Sally.⁴ In Coming Through Slaughter, we find the same fear of emotional dependence. Afraid that his wife and children will reject him, Buddy Bolden defends himself by being unloving, deserting them for a woman he will not have to make a commitment to. Family relations are seen from a postmodern perspective in Running in the Family too. Threatened by her babies, whose demands undermine her sense of self, Lalla denies to herself that she has children, and neglects to feed them. It might seem irrational of Mervyn deliberately to antagonize his family with his antics, when he is so afraid of being hurt by their disapproval, but the "logic" of narcissism governs his actions: it seems to him that if he alienates himself from his family with his inexcusable conduct, then he will have escaped from their threatening hold on him.⁵

We have seen the reasons postmodernism gives for arguing that we are in a safer position when we are detached from

loved ones: not only do we expose ourselves to the risk of being hurt when we love, but, encumbered with responsibilities to family and friends, we cannot devote ourselves to self-defense. We must be free from concern for others to pursue pleasure, since indulging ourselves in pleasure is, for the postmodernist, our only way of transcending the horror we are confronted with in a violent world.⁶ This seems to be the attitude of Ondaatje's characters: they do not appear to be prepared to allow anything to interfere with their pursuit of pleasure, it is so crucial to their survival. It would not occur to Mervyn Ondaatje, in Running in the Family, that he was guilty of negligence deserting his post to attend a party because he is responsible for no one but himself, and he perceives self-indulgence as the most conscientious way of carrying out his duties to himself. For the same reason, Lalla believes it is more responsible to go dancing than nurse her child. Reading Running in the Family, we are impressed by how intensely and ruthlessly Lalla and her generation seek pleasure: "we were always tired," Lalla tells us (41).

We have seen how the postmodern survivor is able to conduct a pursuit of pleasure in a world of horror and atrocity: he has taught himself to translate pain into pleasure. Ondaatje's characters perform this translation by divorcing word from world, thus creating two realities, the painful one which actually exists, but which they must never refer to, and the other which they themselves have created by refusing to use language referentially, inverting the

meanings of pain and pleasure. When Ondaatje's characters lie or joke, they are translating pain into pleasure. This is why Garrett tells jokes while he guns his victims down, why Lalla tells Dickie her dead husband is still alive, and why Bolden and Nora joke, when, as Nora points out, they are supposed to be having a "serious discussion" (Coming Through Slaughter 122). Bolden's retreat into madness is a strategy similar to lying or joking: Bolden withdraws from reality to escape the pain he experiences there, and enters another reality, a private one he constructs himself, careful not to include suffering in that construction. In the insane asylum, Bolden is subjected to atrocities yet feels no injury, because he has no concept of harm or suffering. In the reality he has constructed for himself, his attackers are translated into comforters, the pain they inflict upon him, into pleasure: "They make me love them. They are the arms looking after me. On the second day they came into my room and took off all my clothes and bent me over a table and broke my anus" (139). "Everyone who touches me must be beautiful" (135).

But the most powerful psychological defense Ondaatje's characters have against horror and nausea is their postmodern ability to view all things, even human beings, as inanimate objects of no significance. Persuaded that living beings are insentient, Ondaatje's characters can witness and even perform atrocities with complete indifference. Billy the Kid, for example, has persuaded himself that bodies are

"mindless as paper flowers you dont feed/ or give to drink"
 and therefore believes the victims of violence do not suffer,
 (11). Thus he is untroubled when Angela's arm is ripped open
 by gunshot. Oblivious to her agony as he digs the bullet
 out, he reacts not with horror, but fascination, admiring the
 "mechanics" of her exposed nerves and bone:

Took knife and opened the skin
 more, tugged it back
 on the other side of her arm
 to pick the bullets out
 3 of them
 like those rolled pellet tongues of pigeons

 look at it, I'm looking into your arm
 nothing confused in there
 look how clear (66)

But if they are to survive, it is crucial that
 Ondaatje's characters view not just others, but also
 themselves as machines. Just as they cannot afford to
 acknowledge that their victims suffer, they cannot admit that
 they themselves are capable of feeling horror or nausea.
 Regarding not just others, but themselves as machines permits
 them to commit atrocities unfeelingly. Pat Garrett, for
 example, has learned to substitute thinking, feeling
 responses with reflex actions, so that even gunning a man
 down is something he does automatically, without having to
 interrupt the joke he is telling. Billy, as T.D. MacLulich
 observes, denies his "organic nature": "his gun hand is like
 a separate mechanism, existing apart from the rest of his
 body...." (116, 118).

From this analysis of the strategies of survival

practiced by Ondaatje's characters, we can conclude that Ondaatje's works address the same problem as the literature of postmodernism, and explore solutions we have seen as central to postmodern philosophy. What we need to determine is whether or not he approves of those solutions. Postmodernism sees survival, no matter how we achieve it, as a victory, and insists that we cannot afford to concern ourselves with whether or not the survivor has broken the law or violated a moral code to stay alive. We live in a dangerous state of anarchy, and have more urgent concerns than the observation of courtesy, decency and legality, postmodernists claim. There is only one rule of conduct observed in an anarchic world, they insist, and that is the law of the survival of the fittest. The only behaviour which is appropriate in this kind of world, they reason, is a selfish, ruthless defense of one's own interests.⁷ We find this postmodern argument reflected clearly in The Collected Works, Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family. Survivors are glorified, no matter what they have done to preserve themselves, while victims are depicted with contempt. We find this demonstrated most dramatically in The Collected Works which makes us feel disgusted with Tom O'Folliard, Charlie Bowdre and Gregory because they have not managed to stay alive. As Tom's head breaks in half, he seems ridiculous; we feel contempt for Charlie Bowdre as he urinates uncontrollably and giggles as he dies; but we are most disgusted with Gregory, who is humiliated as he lies

dying by a chicken that "paddles out to him" and takes hold of the vein in his neck, stretching it for yards (8, 12, 15).

But it is not just this suggestion that the victims of violence are antiheroic that makes Ondaatje seem to agree with postmodernism. Another postmodern argument he presents in his work is that because we live in a world growing more and more violent and anarchic, we need a new code of conduct, a new definition of acceptable, appropriate behaviour.⁸ The argument in Ondaatje's work is that because the characters Billy the Kid, Buddy Bolden, Lalla, Mervyn and Doris live in an anarchic world, although their actions might seem reprehensible to us, they cannot be censured. We are to judge them only according to how well they have coped in a world where the odds are against survival. This criterion, which we recognize as postmodern, renders irrelevant the criticism that Billy the Kid is a "sallow punk" with a "cruel" smile, that Buddy Bolden is a weak, irresponsible coward, and that Lalla, Mervyn and Doris behave rudely, indecently, and illegally. What matters is that they are expert survivors, and we are therefore to regard their behaviour as admirable and heroic. We are not to concern ourselves with stories of Billy's mindless cruelty--we are not allowed to dwell, for example, on the account of his hitting a man in the face with a rifle for no reason. The event is glossed over: "He was probably elated," is all the narrator has to say about the matter, which obviously does not interest him (86). Instead, we are to focus our attention on Billy's heroic ability to live in a world of

violence, and not be overwhelmed with nausea. "I can watch the stomach of clocks/ shift their wheels and pins into each other/ and emerge living, for hours," he tells us, and we are supposed to be duly impressed (11). Similarly, we are to reject the suggestions made by Nora and Cornish that Bolden was "corrupted" by Bellocq, and see his retreat into madness as a heroic defying of limits, a "going over barbed wire" (97). Lalla we are to regard with admiration, for being one of the few to "survive" the Jazz Age, and Doris we are supposed to view as heroic for confronting and surviving the darkness of Mervyn's insanity. But it is Mervyn who is presented to us as the heroic ideal, having learned to look upon that which would "destroy" others "instantly" so that he might spare others such a terrible encounter (200).

But at the same time that Ondaatje seems to endorse postmodern philosophy, he voices serious objections to it. We will see, in the analysis of Ondaatje's works that follows, that haunting all three is the sense that while the victim of violence is contemptible, the survivor is monstrous, because he has forfeited his humanity to stay alive. The Collected Works begins by celebrating the ability of Garrett and Billy to immunize themselves to pain and horror, but ends by viewing it with dismay, as an inhuman state Billy is fortunate to free himself from. As Perry Nodelman observes, in "The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid," if Billy "needs to eliminate the smells of flowers and of other people, and even his own sexuality . . . he actually

aspires to be less than human," and this aspiration, Nodelman feels is presented to us as "clearly unhealthy" (75). In the end, The Collected Works rejects the postmodern notion of the hero as ideal assassin and professional survivor, and applauds instead Billy's decision to confront a menacing world without divesting himself of his humanity.⁹

While The Collected Works is openly critical of postmodern strategies of survival, it is more difficult to detect this criticism in Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family. What is stated explicitly in these two works is not criticism, but a justification of postmodernism. What I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, however, is that neither work seems to believe in the justification it is presenting. In their attempt to justify the postmodern prescription for survival, both works protest unconvincingly that the postmodern survivor is not a machine, nor a monster, but a human being whose decision to stay alive at any cost is a decision we should not only understand but approve of. This is what we are given to understand, when, in Coming Through Slaughter, Webb's response to Bolden's madness--horror and disgust--is presented to us as inappropriate, and even morally wrong. Similarly, Running in the Family insists that we approve of what Mervyn did in the name of self-preservation: "Whatever brought you solace we would have applauded. Whatever controlled the fear we all share we would have embraced," Ondaatje tells his departed father, and the reader is expected to concur (201).

But we remain unconvinced, and find it difficult merely

to sympathize with let alone admire these characters, because, as we will see, in spite of themselves, Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family demonstrate how much we need the values they insist we must dispense with to formulate a new code of conduct. Furthermore, neither work succeeds in proving to us that given the circumstances, Bolden, Lalla, Doris and Mervyn were justified in behaving as they did.

The defense of postmodern philosophy in Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family seems unwarranted--we wonder why Ondaatje is making such an effort to deny certain implications of the philosophy which he acknowledged openly in The Collected Works. A possible explanation, that will be explored later in this chapter, is that in the two later works, Ondaatje is defending not so much postmodernism as himself--it just so happens that the kind of conduct he is so anxious to justify is sanctioned by no other philosophy but postmodernism, and so he changes his stance, approving of what in The Collected Works he expressed disapproval of. A dread of censure and rejection pervades Ondaatje's works, and Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family are pleas for understanding and acceptance. They ask the reader to sympathize with conduct he would usually condemn. But it is not just on behalf of Buddy Bolden, Lalla, Mervyn and other Ondaatjes whose controversial behaviour has given the family a bad name that Ondaatje is pleading--it is for himself that he asks acceptance. He tells us that he identifies completely with Buddy Bolden, describing the mysterious

sensation he experienced when he first read Bolden's name:

The thin sheath of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was a sentence, 'Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade....' What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? Did not want to pose in your accent but think in your brain and body.... (134).

Coming Through Slaughter is just as much an attempt to exonerate Ondaatje as Bolden. The desire informing Running in the Family to rehabilitate the family image is not so much Ondaatje's wanting to feel better about Lalla, Doris and Mervyn, as his wanting to feel better about himself. Finding a point from which these characters could be viewed with approval would have been difficult for him: from most perspectives, their actions appear unethical. But from the postmodernist's standpoint, such conduct is admirable, and this is perhaps why Ondaatje, although he denounces postmodernism in The Collected Works, entertains this way of thinking in Running in the Family.

We do not detect personal concerns underlying Ondaatje's interest in postmodern thought in The Collected Works--it would seem that his initial reason for investigating the philosophy was that postmodernism, unlike other philosophies, had a solution to the problem he seemed to be preoccupied

with at that point, the problem of how we are to live in a world becoming more and more anarchic and violent. We have defined the vision in W.S. Burroughs' works as representing utopically the postmodernist's solution: a world governed completely by terrorists yet perfectly inhabitable. The Collected Works begins with a postmodern definition of Utopia similar to Burroughs', but quickly calls that definition into question. The impulse in The Collected Works to idealize the kind of existence postmodernism envisions gives way to an impulse to condemn it. We will focus our examination of The Collected Works on Billy because these conflicting impulses are embodied in him: the tension they generate is eventually resolved when Billy rejects the means of survival postmodernism has prescribed, and accepts death as a more attractive alternative.

Idealizing the postmodern concepts of professional survivor and survival at any cost, Ondaatje indulges his reader at the outset of The Collected Works. Apparently Ondaatje understands that these concepts appeal to us because we feel threatened and victimized by acts of terrorism which seem to have become part of our daily life. The Collected Works seems to play on our fears, arousing our anxieties deliberately, and then indulging us with wish-fulfilling fantasies that assuage those anxieties. It might be useful to consider here the works of Burroughs, and how they first arouse, and then assuage our fears. Threatened by terrorism and anarchy, we find Burroughs' fantasy of leading a Utopian

existence in hell extremely appealing. Lasch explains that as we feel more and more threatened by violence in our world, we perceive ourselves as victims who can do nothing to make habitable once more a world that used to accommodate us, and, since this perception of ourselves is so disturbing, we create "grandiose images of self-reliance" to "compensate" for our inadequacies (The Culture of Narcissism 38, 84). Burroughs' fiction provides us with the very compensatory images we are looking for: although the world he confronts us with is anti-Utopian, his works are very consoling, equipping the victim with unlimited power, and allowing him to conquer and punish the terrorist. This might explain why, although Burroughs' works make for difficult reading, they are popular outside academic and literary circles. Like Burroughs, Ondaatje arouses fear in his reader by confronting him relentlessly with a deeply disturbing vision of a world that is nearly uninhabitable, and then offering him just one source of relief from this distressing vision--the reader is allowed to identify with a character who has adapted to that world in a remarkable way, a professional survivor who is not oppressed by the conditions he must live in. Ondaatje's landscape is, like Burroughs', a no man's land where it would seem impossible for man to survive: an endless desert that assaults the characters with ferocious sun and sandstorms, torturing them with thirst and starvation. Nature is not usually depicted in Canadian literature as an accommodating environment, but of all the nightmare visions of nature Canadian writers have afforded us, Ondaatje has succeeded in

giving us one of the most disturbing. Few characters in Canadian literature seem as threatened by nature as Garrett watched by flowers, Charlie attacked by a chicken, or Billy in the dark feeling the hatred of the caged birds nearby, and envisioning how their weight would cause the roof of the Chisum house to collapse.

In Ondaatje's No man's land there are isolated places where civilization has prevailed over the desert, but it offers the characters no sanctuary from menace: the society Ondaatje portrays is a lawless one such as we encounter in Burroughs' work, a society that sanctions inhumanity and atrocity. A sheriff is appointed by this society, not to replace lawless atrocity with humane justice, but to institutionalize inhumanity.

This world Ondaatje depicts confronts us with our deepest anxieties, reinforcing our fears that our own world is becoming increasingly anarchic, and reinforcing our image of ourselves as potential targets of terrorism. The Collected Works has awakened in us anxieties that can be assuaged by nothing but the consoling image of the professional survivor, the trained killer who is invulnerable to every danger. This is why we find Pat Garrett, ideal assassin, so appealing: he negates our fears of being defenseless in the face of anarchy. Like Burroughs' Captain Strobe, he is a fantasy figure such as those psychologists say we all create to comfort ourselves with, a self-image we carry with us to counter another image we have of ourselves as defenseless

victims. We have seen already how The Collected Works indulges our desire to negate that self-image of victim by inviting us to look with scorn upon the victims of its world. As The Collected Works frees us from having to associate with the victim, it sets up Pat Garrett, "ideal" assassin for us to identify with instead. We find the figure of the assassin so appealing because of all the fantasies that figure embodies. Garrett has the ability we desire to expose ourselves safely to any danger: nothing is deadlier than his gun. Garrett also appeals to us because he has an attitude like the one we wish we could assume: horrified and disgusted by terrorism, we console ourselves with the fantasy that we can confront atrocity with indifference. Garrett appeals to us because he is immune to horror and pain. We are told that he has the mind set of an ideal assassin, who is emotionally detached from others, does not have a conscience, and is immune to desire:

Ideal assassin because his mind was unwarped. Had the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke. One who had decided what was right and forgot all morals. . . . An academic murderer. . . his mind was clear, his body able to drink, his feelings, unlike those who usually work their own way out of hell, not cynical about another's incapacity to get out of problems and difficulties (28-29).

We are gratified by Garrett's ability to make himself

completely invulnerable to the pain of human relations--reading The Collected Works we indulge ourselves with this fantasy of emotional detachment to such an extent that we are gratified rather than horrified by Garrett's ability to hunt down and kill without feeling even those men who have been his friends.

Through Garrett, Ondaatje is also able to arouse and then assuage our fear of unconscious and irrational desire with the fantasy that we can make ourselves immune to ungovernable appetites. Man's fear of desire is not new, but it is a particular concern of our society because as our world becomes more and more unpredictable, our response to that world becomes unpredictable too.¹⁰ Disturbed by our inability to know how we will react, we fantasize being in total control of ourselves, able to resist even the strongest attractions and repulsions.¹¹ Much is made in The Collected Works of Garrett's remarkable self-control. Even when he is addicted to alcohol, he is not governed by cravings, but drinks according to a schedule he sets for himself, not one determined by biological cravings.

It is difficult to determine why Ondaatje indulges the reader with these consoling postmodern fantasies. It does not seem likely that he is using Pat Garrett to reassure himself that we can survive in an anarchic world. Nor does it seem likely that he is applauding postmodernism at the outset of the work, because he has not realized, at that point, the implications he warns us of later. Perhaps he is

exploring the fears that have given rise to postmodern philosophy in an attempt to account for the appeal postmodernism has. He seems to be gauging the strength of that appeal when he arouses those fears in the reader, and then offers as consolation fantasies which are more and more morally outrageous. He is perhaps experimenting with limits here: how far can postmodern arguments be taken in a work before the reader protests? At what point does the reader refuse to be consoled by fantasies that violate his sense of ethics?¹² Ondaatje, like Burroughs, seems to be criticizing postmodern philosophy as wish-fulfilling fantasy, and then questioning literature which indulges readers with that fantasy. We can find evidence for this last supposition when we examine the tone of the early part of The Collected Works. It is difficult to determine what Ondaatje's attitude is at this point toward the idealized vision of postmodernism he is presenting, but it would seem to be sarcastic. This sarcasm is directed in particular toward the narrator while he is introducing Garrett to us: we feel his contrived manner of speech is being ridiculed: his stance, which is too flippant, and too full of bravado, belies someone who is immature and uncertain, insecurely espousing beliefs he cannot really defend, and pretending to be more reassured by those beliefs than he really is. He invites our scorn by stating far too casually remarks he knows are disturbing, using sentence fragments to sound as off-hand as possible: "Pat Garrett, ideal assassin. Public figure, the mind of a doctor. . . Ideal assassin for his mind was unwarped. Had the ability to

kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke" (289). Deliberately understating every assertion he makes, he sounds just a little too cool: we detect Ondaatje's contempt for him, and we ourselves respond with scorn. We see through his ploy and this makes us contemptuous: he wants to seem callous, unaffected by horror and pain, but we sense the distress he is trying to hide. He wants to seem undaunted, but his bravado tells us how frightened he is.

Nevertheless, our reaction to the narrator is ambiguous--although we distrust him, we allow ourselves to be taken in by his bravado, because it is an attitude we ourselves are tempted to assume in the face of a hostile, unpredictable world--the attitude of the streetwise punk. It is possible that Ondaatje is playing a game with us here, holding out as an attractive possibility the stance of the narrator, and then ridiculing those who adopt that stance. Where it becomes even clearer that Ondaatje views the postmodern code of survival as wish-fulfilling fantasy is in the comic book legend of Billy the Kid. In this section of The Collected Works he ridicules both the fantasy figure of the postmodern survivor, and our tendency to console ourselves with that figure. The comic book legend Ondaatje includes can be viewed as a satiric comment on the code of the postmodern hero. Long before he appeared in the contemporary novel, the postmodern survivor emerged in the comic book. When we identify the code of conduct adhered to by the superhero of the comics, we recognize it as the same

code we have defined as postmodern. The Kid in the comic book version inhabits the same anarchic world as Garrett and other postmodern characters. Apparently, like Garrett, his sole occupation is defending himself against assailants. His one concern being to avoid a violent death, he needs but two abilities: he must be brave and strong. These, we remember, were the only two abilities Garrett needs, although "brave" would be defined as "neutral", in postmodern terms, and as "psychopathic" in psychological terms; and "strong" translated into a postmodern ideal would be "professional assassin."

Ondaatje's ridicule is much more apparent here than earlier in The Collected Works because the voice of the comic book is unambiguously self-mocking--it knows better than to take this code seriously. Therefore, the Kid's indifference to his own suffering appears as a flippancy which is simply ridiculous: "Start talkin' hombre, 'fore I say MY piece about that knife throwing act." We laugh with contempt at this bravado, instead of being impressed, attributing his nonchalance in such a dangerous world to a gross ignorance rather than an ability to confront atrocity undaunted. The Kid shares with the characters of a postmodern novel a disdain for comforts, but in the comic book, we find his attitude ludicrous: "The man called Billy the Kid is not impressed by the magnificent richness of his surroundings. The golden cutlery means nothing. . . The priceless china and crystal matter not, and the food cooked by a French chef? PFAGGH!" (100). Like the postmodern character, the Kid

cannot afford meaningful relations with others, as his sole concern must be self-preservation. But unlike the postmodern character, who is presented as mature enough and strong enough to be completely self-reliant, the Kid strikes us as an awkward social misfit who does not know how to treat others: unused as he is to relating to women, the Princessa has to keep telling him how to behave: "I think I can stand now, Senor. . . if you will put me down." "Huh? Oh sorry, Senorita."

The Collected Works is concerned initially, then, with exploring the attraction postmodernism has for us, but it addresses itself to another issue which seems to supersede the first in importance: the question of whether the philosophy of postmodernism is sound. While The Collected Works appreciates how gratifying we find the concept of the postmodern survivor, it attempts to show us why we cannot respond to a violent world in the way that postmodernism recommends. It proposes an alternate response: we must be prepared to suffer and even die for our values rather than forfeit our humanity to survive. We detect this shift in concern as Billy the Kid emerges to supplant Garrett as hero of the work. As Eileen Sarkar has observed, in "Michael Ondaatje's Billy the Kid: The Esthetics of Violence," Billy is the antithesis of the postmodern survivor--he is not equipped to be a sane assassin. He cannot come to chaos neutral (234).¹³ The duel between Garrett and Billy is not just a battle between sheriff and outlaw, but a conflict of

ideologies. It seems paradoxical that the triumph of humanitarian concerns over postmodern ones is signalled by the death of Billy at the hands of Garrett. But we shall see that Billy's death is a victory, not a defeat, an affirmation that postmodern thought is inadequate, and must give way to a more humane way of thinking.¹⁴

The work convinces us to shift our alliance from Garrett to Billy by subtly changing Garrett's image. As the work progresses, we come to realize how monstrous he is, and we begin to draw away in horror from the figure we were so anxious to identify with earlier. Although Garrett's original function in the work is, like the function of Burroughs' Captain Strobe, to quell our anxieties, assuring us that we have the capacity to survive, he begins to horrify us as we appreciate the price he has paid to stay alive.

Garrett becomes monstrous, then, as the work progresses, while Billy the Kid appeals to us more and more. At the same time that the prospect of what Garrett represents starts to threaten us, we are consoled by Billy confirming our sense of values, and assuring us that we would never have to come to the point where we were forced to dehumanize ourselves to stay alive.

Because at the outset of The Collected Works postmodern beliefs are entertained, an assassin is the most appropriate hero for that part of the work. But although Garrett is defined as an ideal at the beginning of the work, that definition is reassessed, and the picture we are left with is of Garrett as inhuman--a monster, or a machine. Nodelman

observes that

Ondaatje reveals the deficiency of [Garrett's] cool sanity by repeating the phrase "sane assassin" until it turns in, on itself, the "in-" at the end of "assassin" joining onto the front of "sane" and revealing the truth; the real madmen are those who believe that sanity is total control and total lack of emotion.

(76)

Garrett becomes more and more appalling to the reader as the work progresses, so that when we are told of his penchant for stuffing dead birds, we find his hobby disgusting. We perceive a parallel between Garrett, with his stuffed birds, and Livingstone with his monster dogs. Livingstone, a madman, has deliberately bred deformed, brain-damaged, vicious dogs to prove to himself that he can assume control of the anarchic world he finds himself in, and dictate its ordering. His atrocious actions are a direct comment upon the postmodern hero, whose virtues are the ability to gain control in every situation, and to derive pleasure from even the most anti-Utopian world. We see just what manner of pleasure that is: a perverse delight in corruption. Livingstone takes joy in seeing his dogs, the stock of fine purebreds, degenerate to the lowest condition they can possibly reach. This, The Collected Works tells us, would be the achievement of postmodernism--the ultimate

degeneration of our world. In its testing of limits, this is where postmodernism will take us.

At the same time that Garrett appears more and more monstrous to us, Billy the Kid becomes more and more human. He undergoes a transformation, not necessarily continuous, in which he relinquishes his psychopathic immunity to pain and suffering, to recover his humanity. We see him transformed from invulnerable automaton to suffering man. When we first see him, his stance is that of a postmodern hero. He describes outright atrocity with complete indifference, revealing but one concern, that his account be accurate. "These are the killed," he announces matter-of-factly, preoccupied with qualifying his reference by dividing the list into categories, oblivious to the fact that his subject is violent murder. He sees no horror in the fact that three of the men he killed were friends, that he was but twelve when he killed one of the victims listed, that he himself is one of the dead. He sees nothing callous in grouping the men he has killed with the birds he has shot in practices, and he overlooks the same lack of distinction when he sees no difference between Angela's split arm and a dead man (6).

This, then, is our first impression of Billy--a man who has no sense of values. But not long after he is introduced to us, we discover that he is not as postmodern as he seems. He gives us an account of a week he spent meditating in a barn--no postmodern character is capable of meditating (17-18). To survive, postmodern man must never be aware of himself. As Sugerman explains, he retreats into "nonbeing",

playing dead to stay alive (Sin and Madness 32-33). But what is even more uncharacteristic of a postmodern man, Billy lapses into vulnerability on occasions, and experiences suffering. He describes being overwhelmed not just by physical pain, which a postmodern man does not feel, but by mental suffering, plagued by anxiety, horror and disgust, emotions the postmodern man is incapable of feeling. As Judith Owens observes, "a picture emerges of a Billy who feels vulnerable, threatened by death, by the unleashed energy of sexuality, by the disorder of the natural world" (125). He is revolted by the sight of Charlie Bowdre dying, "the nerves shot out/ the liver running around there like a headless hen jerking / brown all over the yard", and confesses that he is unable to eat chicken since he saw the convulsions of a slaughtered hen (12). He describes the rats, maddened by fermented grain, devouring one another, as "grotesque", a word the indifferent postmodern man would not have in his vocabulary. He is so disgusted and horrified by the sight of the rats killing a chipmunk, and then eating one another, that he loses his composure and fires at them wildly (18). But we understand how completely vulnerable he is to pain when he describes his recovery from burns to his legs, and his suffering sunstroke. In his graphic descriptions of this acute agony, he conveys the physical sensation of pain as vividly as Sylvia Plath:

Then starting to rub and pour calamine like ice
only it felt like the tongue of a very large animal

my god I remember each swab felt like the skin and flesh had been moved off completely leaving only raw bone riddled with loose nerves being blown about and banging against each other from just her slow breath (34).

. . . the sun turned into a pair of hands and began to pull out the hairs in my head. Twist pluck twist pluck. In two hours I was bald, my head like a lemon. It used a fingernail and scratched a knife line from front to back on the skin. A hairline of blood bubbled up and dried. . . Then with very thin careful fingers it began to unfold my head drawing back each layer of skin and letting it flap over my ears (76).

Gradually, we discover what it is that makes Billy, unlike Garrett, susceptible to pain. To be immune to suffering, we have seen, the postmodern character must be insensible. Quite the contrary, Billy is hypersensitive--sensations which we would scarcely be aware of overwhelm him, he feels, them so intensely. The simple act of breathing evokes an intense response from him--he is made ecstatic by the feeling of the air "crashing", as he experiences it, into his nostrils (49). He describes a hypersensitive consciousness of others which is quite unlike the obliviousness he conveyed when he did not distinguish between the lives of humans and the lives of animals, and between

parts of the body, and the person himself. "Strange how I feel people/ not close to me/as if their dress were against my shoulder/ and as they bend down/ the strange smell of their breath/ moving across my face/ or my eyes / magnifying the bones across a room/ shifting in a wrist" (39).

Apparently what triggers these hypersensitive responses in Billy is a deep sense of values. He experiences these moments of intense sensitivity whenever he is about to lose or attain something he cherishes. For example, it is because he values the friendship of the Chisums, and the security of their home, that the sensations he experiences when he is with them, or even when he is thinking of them, are so keenly felt. While still miles away from the Chisum ranch, he envisions his friends with a clarity so precise it is startling. He not only sees, but hears and feels the mental image he has of them, an image of what he values most: the comfort and stability of domestic routine, the security of a longlasting friendship he has with people who he knows so well now that he can predict virtually every move they make. As Owens puts it, "Billy revels in the sheer predictability of life at the Chisum ranch" (130).¹⁵

"Even now, this far way, I can imagine them moving among the rooms. It is nine in the morning. They are leaning back in their chairs after their slow late Saturday breakfast. John with the heels of his brown boots on the edge of the table in the space he cleared of his plate and cup and cutlery,

the cup in his hands in his lap. The table with four plates--two large and two small. The remnants of bacon fat and eggs on the larger ones, the black crumbs of toast butter and marmalade (Californian) on the others. One cup, in a saucer, one saucer that belonged to the cup that is in John Chisum's hands now. Across the table on the other side is Sallie, in probably her long brown and yellow dress, the ribbon down her front to the waist with pale blue buttons, a frill on either side of her neck along her shoulders. By now she would have moved the spare chair so she too could put her feet up, barefoot as always, her toes crinkling at the wind that comes from the verandah door (32).

To hold these values, Billy has not been able to immunize himself against pain the same way Garrett has. When he suffers sunstroke, he screams out in protest against the excruciating pain, both physical and mental, but he comes to realize, before he dies, that the price of immunity to pain is too high. Rather than forfeit his humanity by rendering himself insensible to pain, Billy chooses to suffer as he dies, and even rejoices that he is suffering, because his pain confirms for him that he is human. He slices his arm on the broken window pane after Garrett has fatally wounded him, not to hasten his death, but to make himself more acutely aware that he is still human, and capable of feeling: "the

pain at my armpit I'm glad for/ keeping me alive at the bone"
(95).¹⁶

Examining Ondaatje's next work, Coming Through Slaughter, we will see that, unlike The Collected Works, it does not take the stand that we should heroically choose to suffer and even die rather than forfeit our humanity in the struggle to survive. Rather, Coming Through Slaughter insists that we are not capable of such a response. As the following analysis will show, the work claims that there is a limit to the amount of pain man can endure, and that it is inhumane to condemn those who have succumbed and used questionable means of self-preservation to stay alive. What is stressed in Coming Through Slaughter is that no one can bear the pain and horror of an anarchic world without defenses: even extraordinary ability to bear pain, must finally opt for analgesia.

If Coming Through Slaughter asserted no more than this-- that we should view with compassion those who must divest themselves of values and dehumanize themselves to survive-- then the work might have found a sympathetic audience. But unfortunately, as my analysis will show, it shifts its position to ground that cannot be defended. Coming Through Slaughter refuses to admit that Bolden's strategy of survival--a madness that insulates him from pain--though "necessary" is also degrading and even obscene. Instead of admitting this, the work tries to persuade us that Bolden's insanity is a heroic accomplishment--a victorious defiance of artistic limits. Daring to hit notes impossible to play,

"his mind on the pinnacle of something collapsed" (133). As the following argument will demonstrate, the reader is never convinced of this because in spite of itself, the work voices doubts, so it ends up confirming instead of dispelling misgivings the reader feels about the claims Coming Through Slaughter is making here.

While it fails finally in its attempt to justify the postmodern argument that we have a right to forfeit our humanity to survive, Coming Through Slaughter does persuade us, initially, to make some concessions to the postmodernist. They are small concessions, and we forget them later, when the work pushes its demands too far, but reading the first part of the work, we are quite sympathetic to Bolden's postmodern attitudes, especially his dread of certainties and the bonds that tie him to loved ones. Barry Maxwell observes, in "Surrealistic Aspects of Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter," that Bolden is "offered to us as violently opposed to surety, to the complacency of the predictable" (105); we can appreciate that a jazz musician cannot allow himself to be governed by certainties: Bolden despises formal music, and improvisation is for him the only valid way to play an instrument. We can understand that his objection to certainties would be reflected in other areas of his life: Bolden lives in the underworld, where he does not have to obey the law, and where he can ignore restrictive social conventions such as marriage. Coming Through Slaughter even persuades us to sympathize with Bolden rather than condemn him for his inability to commit himself to his

children, Nora, and his friends, by convincing us of the postmodern argument that we cannot afford to bind ourselves to loved ones. The work succeeds in impressing upon us that Bolden had no choice but to desert his loved ones, when his dependence upon them grew too dangerous. Without their support, he cannot exist, because it is from them that he draws his sense of identity. Therefore, when they threaten to withhold their affection from him, he feels himself ceasing to be. He feels he must kill Pickett or else "die" himself when he suspects Nora is transferring her love from him to her ex-pimp. In nightmares, confronted with the death of his children, Bolden commits suicide, but it is not as though he is taking his own life: the children have already "killed" him, since without them, he enters a state of nonbeing. Bolden reacts so aggressively to criticism from the other band members and his audience because he feels himself being annihilated by criticism. To survive, he has no choice but to detach himself from others so that they cannot destroy him with their rejection.

Bolden might seem to contradict himself hiding from his painful love for his wife, children and friends by taking a new lover. But if we examine his relation to Robin more closely, we see that it is the one kind of relation between people that postmodernism sanctions. Bolden is in no danger of becoming committed to Robin, and does not feel threatened that she will consume him, because she is the wife of his friend, and he does not want to "hurt anybody", meaning he

does not perceive himself as taking Robin away from Jaelin. There will be no jealousy in this triangle, he believes, because none of them expect permanent unconditional sustaining love.

Just as we are persuaded of the postmodern argument that Bolden is right to "defend" himself from loved ones, so we are convinced--eventually--that Webb deserves to be condemned rather than applauded for refusing to let Buddy retreat narcissistically, from the world. As Maxwell has observed, "Webb is an ambiguous figure in the text" (108). Initially, we find Webb very attractive, and want him to succeed in tracking Buddy down. But we come to appreciate the postmodern argument that Buddy has to be allowed his narcissistic defenses when we realize what hell he is going through trying to readjust to the world Webb has dragged him back to. "Travelling again," he thinks, on the journey back, "Home to nightmare" (106). "My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back," he tells us, likening himself to the mattress whores, "their bodies murdered and [his] brain suicided" (119). Forced to leave the sanctuary of the postmodern triad with the Brewitts, Bolden is once more exposed to the pain of commitment. Back with his friends and family, he feels them consuming him, and the pain is unbearable now, because it is heightened by a sense of guilt (121). He feels his self-destructive obsession with his music returning again too, an obsession he managed to rid himself of while living with the Brewitts: "my brain atrophied and soaked in the music I avoid, like milk

travelling over the border into cheese. All that masturbation of practice every morning" (119).

Up until this point, then, we accept the postmodern arguments put forward in Coming Through Slaughter, but we balk at the postmodern notion that Bolden's retreat into madness is admirable. We are asked to believe that his insanity is a daring exploration of the extremes of experience. Bolden stepped over the edge into madness, Coming Through Slaughter insists, to push his music as far as it could go--to the very threshold of silence (133). His daring was rewarded, we are told, because journeying that far, he arrived at sublimity (148). His state of madness is presented to us as "blessed" (148). We are allowed to view the world from his mad perspective, and it appears as Utopia: having been tormented by insatiable desires all his life, Bolden is no longer hungry (148). He is given injections to keep him in a painless state (135). Threatened all his life, he is at last out of danger: unable to comprehend injury and fear, the insane Bolden experiences atrocity itself as pleasure, looking forward to the guards' visit, when he will be raped and abused (139).

But at the same time that Coming Through Slaughter wants us to believe that by relinquishing his sanity, Bolden has achieved a breakthrough in his art, and entered a Utopian world, it voices doubts about this argument, in spite of itself. We hear these doubts being expressed inadvertently when certain devices meant to persuade us to take Bolden's

perspective fail to perform this function. To make Bolden's perspective more convincing to us, Ondaatje sets up foils we are meant to reject, sympathizing instead with Bolden. For example, we are intended to accept not Nora's, but Bolden's view of Bellocq, not Webb's but Bolden's view of his silence, not Cornish's but Bolden's view of the insane asylum. However, it is Nora, Webb and Cornish we identify with, while we remain detached from Bolden. Although we are meant to trust Bolden's sympathetic account of Bellocq, and question Nora's opinion of him, it is Bolden we doubt, and agree wholeheartedly with Nora when she accuses Bellocq of having destroyed Bolden:

I hated him Buddy.

But WHY? He was so harmless. He was just a lonely man. You know he even talked to his photographs he was that lonely. Why do you hate him? You never even saw his pictures, they were beautiful. They were gentle. Why do you hate him?

She turned to face him.

LOOK AT YOU. LOOK AT WHAT HE DID TO YOU. LOOK AT YOU. LOOK AT YOU. GODDAMIT. LOOK AT YOU (127).

Although we are meant to disapprove of Webb for responding with nausea to Bolden's mad silence, we sympathize with him instead: not even when Ondaatje portrays him in an unattractive light, stumbling from the room like a clown because he is going to vomit, does Ondaatje succeed in making us shift our allegiance from Webb to Bolden (150-1).

Likewise, given two conflicting accounts of Bolden's madness, one from Cornish, the other from Bolden himself, we are meant to believe Bolden, and dismiss Cornish as having failed to understand Bolden's experience (145). But this is not how we respond: Bolden cannot assure us that he is content because we refuse to believe him: Ondaatje has underestimated the degree of our horror confronted with the spectacle of man divested of his humanity. It is Cornish we choose to listen to, because we do not have permission to believe Bolden--Ondaatje has not taken into account powerful inhibitions that keep us from entertaining the possibility even that Bolden might be right.

It is those same inhibitions that keep us from interpreting as we are supposed to Bertram Lord's attempts to remove Bolden from the asylum. We are meant to appreciate Bolden's reasons for refusing to take part in the escape Lord has organized: unlike the other prisoners, who are desperate to break out because of "guard rapes, bad plumbing, labour, lack of heat," Bolden takes "sublimely" "rapes from what he thought were ladies in blue pyjamas. And work as his duty to the sun" (148). Because Coming Through Slaughter does not take pains to liberate us from a sense of ethics we bring to the work, we are appalled by Bolden's ability to accept abuse, and disapprove of it as a perverse adaptation to what he, like the others, should have fled from.

Far from helping his reader to overcome the inhibitions that keep him from approving of Bolden's stance, Ondaatje--in

spite of himself, it would seem--reinforces those inhibitions by juxtaposing with the account of Lord a horrifying documentation of the living conditions in the East Louisiana State Hospital:

1853. A minority report from a special committee stated patients in direst poverty and lacked sufficient food. Dinner consisted of a tin cupful of soup, meat about the size of a hen's egg, and a small piece of bread. Breakfast was bread and coffee. Supper was bread and tea. Women patients not properly clothed. Cells had no heat . . .

1857. J.D. Barkdull made Superintendent. First time the institution was under the control of a medical man . . .

1855. Dysentery swept crowded wards and it was stated that 'the diseased patients fell like grass before the scythe' . . .

During the Civil War it was almost impossible to get food or water supplies to the hospital....(143).

Including these details, Coming Throught Slaughter seems to be admitting that it does not believe its own argument, that Bolden found a Utopian existence at the asylum. This is why I disagree with Maxwell's argument that Bolden has "come to [a] 'land of beaming shadows'" and has "recognized . . .

the presence of beauty, kindness and right relations with living things" (135-6). I do not believe, as Maxwell does, that Coming Through Slaughter has redefined relations between humans for the better, holding those relations "at par with those between humans and animals, humans and objects, humans and imagination, and consequently the old nagging, binding humanism is shuffled off..." (135). I do not base my argument solely on the details of life in the asylum that Ondaatje has taken from records: we can find further evidence to suggest that Coming Through Slaughter finds attractive the very antithesis of what it purports to believe in. Although it argues that human relations are sinister, in spite of itself, it presents Bolden's relations with his children, Nora, Webb, and Cornish as the one beautiful thing that redeems his squalid, obscene world. The scenes in which Bolden interacts with loved ones are the most compelling and authentic in the work, persuading us that any joy to be had in the wasteland will come from intimate human relations and not promiscuity.¹⁷ Although Coming Through Slaughter suggests various alternatives to intimate relations, in particular marriage and family, it has to admit that none of these alternatives are viable. Robin, Jaelin and Bolden are desperately unhappy in the triangle that was supposed to be a sanctuary from pain: the night swim Bolden and Robin take becomes a metaphor for their terrible situation: "Belpw our heads all the evil dark swimming creatures are waiting to brush us into nightmare into heart attack to suck us under

into the darkness into the complications . . . Swimming towards the sound of madness" (69).

Nor can Coming Through Slaughter celebrate Bellocq's solution to the pain of human relations--complete withdrawal from the world. It is in its treatment of Bellocq that Coming Through Slaughter betrays the greatest loss of confidence in its own arguments. Identifying the doubts Ondaatje ends up expressing about Bellocq, we will recognize them as the doubts that have been raised about postmodernism. Coming Through Slaughter attempts to present Bellocq to us as a model survivor: "self-sufficient, complete as a perpetual motion machine" (56). Ondaatje's vocabulary here is that of the postmodernist's. Understanding so well the art of survival, Bellocq is set up, in his relation to Bolden, as a foil to Webb: whereas Webb as Bolden's mentor does more harm than good, disarming him and then forcing him into a world that will destroy him; Bellocq counsels Bolden in the art of self-defense, teaching him how to make himself invulnerable, by detaching himself from those who could hurt him, and curing himself of his need for fame (91).

But Coming Through Slaughter cannot sustain its argument that Bellocq represents an ideal strategy for survival. The defense mechanisms Bellocq uses to stay ~~alive~~ are in the end self-destructive. His philosophy of survival is illogical, because it confuses survival and self-destruction, leading him to commit suicide in a misguided attempt at self-preservation. Bellocq surrounds himself with a frame of chairs, sets them on fire, and hurls himself against a

burning wall, expecting to be "clasped to a certainty" (67). Unable to distinguish between self-preservation and self-destruction, he cannot understand why he is on fire, falling to his death. "Everything has gone wrong. The wall is not there to catch or hide him" (67).

I have argued that Coming Through Slaughter is voicing, in spite of itself, doubts about beliefs we recognize as postmodern. It could be argued, however, that when Ondaatje appears to be celebrating these beliefs, he is actually being ironic, so that what I have identified as contradictions would not be contradictions at all, but two different means of expression: direct and ironic. But there is no evidence that Ondaatje is being ironic when he suggests Bolden has found sublimity in madness: he is in awe of the man whose "mind on the pinnacle of something collapsed" (133). Any irony Ondaatje feels is directed toward not Bolden, but those who object to what Bolden has done. Webb and Bella Cornish are portrayed as contemptible as they discuss Bolden's madness. Bella is presented to us as a simple-minded busybody who enjoys the sensation she is creating, relishing the unpleasant details of her story:

She talked on and on repeating herself and her descriptions, going back to things she'd mentioned and retelling them in greater detail for Webb . . . HE TOUCHES THINGS, like taps first the hot water one and then the cold, which was not true for there were only cold water taps at the East Louisiana State

Hospital, but she continued to describe--as fascinated by that strange act as if it was the luxurious itch under a scab (150).

Webb, too, is ridiculed for his inability to understand Bolden: he is depicted as a "flapping body" hurrying down the stairs, smiling idiotically and repeating "I gotta throw up 'scuse me 'scuse me" (151).

Ondaatje cannot afford to regard Bolden ironically, given his reason for writing the musician's story. Why Ondaatje was compelled to give an account of the fairly obscure jazz musician's life is a question from which all other questions about the work seem to arise. Some critics suppose that Coming Through Slaughter is an attempt to resurrect a part of the past that has vanished, but while Ondaatje does seem troubled that so few remember Bolden, he is more concerned that what memories there are of the musician might not be very flattering.¹⁸ Coming Through Slaughter seeks not so much to resurrect as rehabilitate the image of Bolden, who is remembered as a debauched, corrupted, paranoid egomaniac. The most urgent concern in Coming Through Slaughter is to convince the reader that Buddy's apparent breakdown was in actuality a breakthrough such as geniuses experience. Bolden stopped playing not because he was exhausted, having abused himself by drinking excessively and harbouring dark obsessions awakened in him by Bellocq, but because he "pushed his art to the furthest limits possible, and then beyond, into silence.

Ondaatje's attempt to justify Bolden's conduct is perhaps prompted by a need to justify his own actions. Ondaatje tells us that he identifies very closely with Bolden: when he reads Bolden's life story he is shocked to find himself reading about his own life (134). What Ondaatje seems to identify with is Bolden's painful, unfulfilled need for approval, his tendency to direct hatred against himself whenever he has been rejected, and his need to rebel against what is conventional and socially acceptable. Ondaatje, in seeking to justify Bolden's self-indulgence and his defiance of prohibitions, is trying to justify his own endorsement of the postmodern code of conduct.

Ondaatje, then, has a vested interest in justifying postmodern beliefs writing Coming Through Slaughter, because he identifies so closely with Buddy Bolden that any criticism of the musician would reflect on him. He is driven by personal reasons even more urgent writing the autobiographical Running in the Family: here, it is members of his own family he must exonerate for having lived according to a postmodern code. Ondaatje has much at stake here, and we feel his desperation throughout the work, especially when he admits at one point that there are some facts about his father that he simply cannot come to terms with (181). In its attempt to justify postmodernism, Running in the Family impresses us as Ondaatje's most misdirected effort: instead of striking out in the promising direction The Collected Works pointed him toward, around the obstacles

postmodern philosophy put in his way, he is obliged to leave this route unexplored because it is the story of his family he is telling, and the actions of the Ondaatjes must be justified.

Like Coming Through Slaughter, Running in the Family fails in its attempt to convince us that there is nothing wrong with forfeiting one's values to survive. The justifications presented in Running in the Family disturb us even more than the argument we saw forwarded in Coming Through Slaughter--that Buddy, in his dehumanized state, has found an ideal existence. There are three arguments presented in Running in the Family which defend living without values; none of them are sound, and they contradict each other. One of the three claims Running in the Family tries to make is that traditional values are useless to us in our anarchic world and should be substituted with new values that would help us cope with the violence and absurdity that postmodernists feel are now part of our daily existence. Doris, having to cope with Mervyn's insanity, exemplifies this: "my mother," Ondaatje tells us,

the lover of Tennyson and early Yeats, began to realize that she had caught onto a different breed of dog. She was to become tough and valiant in a very different world from then on . . . my father went down a path unknown to his parents and wife. She followed him and coped with him for fourteen

years (149).

Running in the Family proposes a new set of values much like the code of conduct we find in postmodern literature. It is a code based on the premise that we must let no other concerns interfere with self-preservation. Most of the characters in Running in the Family live by this code, but no one follows it as stringently as Lalla. She is careful to live for the present only, forming no emotional attachments, and devoting herself entirely to the pursuit of pleasure.

But while Running in the Family champions the postmodern code of conduct, it contradicts itself occasionally by taking a different stand: traditional values should be upheld, the work sometimes argues, but even when they are not, no one is seriously hurt. There are close calls, the work concedes, but they are humorous, after all: to consider just two examples, the accounts we are given of Mervyn nearly killing his family, driving while drunk, and of Noel deliberately setting his sofa on fire, and then throwing it out the window, sinking the boats of the Oxford rowing team in the process, concede that anarchy results when the Ondaatjes dispense with tradition and attempt to live according to a new code of conduct. But this is not much of a concession, because anarchy is glorified in these accounts as an antidote to law and morality.

And there is still a third claim the work makes, which contradicts the two we have already seen: Running in the Family sometimes insists that its characters are, in fact, upholding

traditional values--although it may not seem that way. We are told that what appears to us to be selfishness in Lalla is actually generosity; that what would seem to have been promiscuity governing the history of the Ondaatje family was in fact fidelity; and what appears to us to be an irresponsible nature in Mervyn is really a firm commitment to duty. To argue this way is illogical and self-defeating: to protest that its characters are generous, faithful and responsible is to condemn them, in a work that has opted to glorify the postmodern way of living.¹⁹

It would seem that Running in the Family makes contradictory claims in a rather desperate attempt to validate an argument that cannot be supported logically.²⁰ It is only through illogical contradictions that the work can argue that we must reject values to make life }endurable. Running in the Family makes the same assertion we have seen the postmodernist make--that values cause life to be intolerably boring because they guarantee stability and certainty, both of which are seen as highly undesirable. The destructive consequences of order and tradition are perhaps best represented in Running in the Family by Bampa's household. The whole family lives "in terror", governed by an order described as "painfully strict" (56). Bampa's wife lives in a state of nonbeing, unable to "blossom until after his death" (56). His son Mervyn is "bored and frantic" (35).

Since boredom presents itself as such a horror to Ondaatje's characters, whoever can make life unpredictable, bizarre and even dangerous for those around them is

admirable. This is why selfishness and irresponsibility are viewed as virtues rather than vices in the work: Lalla, Mervyn and Doris are not criticised, but applauded, because by creating chaos with their self-indulgent, reckless behaviour, they spare everyone ennui.

Living without values may save the Ondaatjes from boredom, but what Running in the Family cannot deny is that the postmodern worlds of Lalla and Mervyn collapse, undermined by amorality and the chaos that an absence of values gives rise to. Because it was a time when values were dispensed with, the Jazz Age is presented to us, not just in Running in the Family, but in Coming Through Slaughter as well, as an ideal time. However, both works have to admit that the Jazz Age exhausts itself and brings about its own end: we were always tired, Lalla confesses, and the novel acknowledges "The waste of youth. Burned purposeless" (47). "We had no order among ourselves. . . . We were exhausted," Bolden admits in defeat (99). Those who live by a postmodern code, dispensing with values to live for the moment, are eventually consumed by it: to remain in a constant state of frenzy, overstimulated, confronting one crisis after another, they spend their energy recklessly without any way of replenishing it. Bankrupt, the Jazz Age collapses in Running in the Family but it passes its code onto the next generation, which in turn, burns itself out. Lalla's daughter, Doris, and her husband Mervyn collapse, exhausted by a strenuous lifestyle which demands all their strength,

and can in no way revitalize them.

Although Running in the Family admits that the lives of an entire generation were wasted, that Doris and Mervyn were ruined, and that the Ondaatje family disintegrated, nevertheless it makes the disconcerting claim that nobody has been hurt living without values. This claim is pushed to absurd lengths: we are asked to believe, for example, that friends and relatives will not be offended by the inconsiderate, ~~outrageous~~ behaviour of those who have no morals. Lalla can steal from her friends, Mervyn can knock a friend unconscious, and can beat his wife, sick with typhoid, and we are to believe all will be forgiven. Running in the Family claims, too, that there is nothing dangerous about irresponsible behaviour. Of course there will be accidents, the work agrees, when drunken party-goers drive recklessly, but nobody will be hurt, it is insisted, when the car veers off the road and disappears under the water of a rice paddy. There is nothing dangerous about Mervyn going to a party instead of standing guard at his post, or about Lalla forcing a child to eat the poisonous tongue of the thalagoya. Running in the Family can claim, even, that the bite of a rabid animal is not harmful: Lalla and her friends do not bother to alert T.W. Roberts that the dog which had bitten him had rabies because it is "safe" for them to assume that T.W. would survive.

Only in the world of comedy would such outrageous claims be valid. There, the relation between cause and effect does not exist, and therefore no harmful consequences follow

irresponsible or immoral actions. Treating his autobiography as comedy rather than documentary, Ondaatje can claim that the code his characters live by does not hurt anyone, but his argument is severely limited. It is true only in the comic realm, and has no validity in the world of actuality, the world we presume Ondaatje meant to address, when he opted to write an autobiography rather than fiction.

Since Running in the Family is autobiographical, and therefore cannot afford to diagnose as unhealthy the human relations it portrays, it attempts instead to deny that a problem exists. But while much effort is misdirected in the work, in trying to mask with contradictory claims the ailment undermining the family, there are times, especially toward the end of the work, when Ondaatje acknowledges the ailment, and contrasts it to what he seems to consider a healthy state. This is represented by his half-sister Susan and her husband Sunil. After trying to glorify the unrestrained, unpredictable, selfish behaviour of Lalla, Doris and Mervyn, in the end Running in the Family contrasts this conduct unfavourably with the responsible, thoughtful, stable conduct of the Pereras: "She is very gentle, Susan, my half-sister. Almost utterly humble. So sitting here with Susan and Sunil I find myself surprised they are younger than me. She has this calmness and quietness opposed to the anger and argument which I see in myself, my brother, and two sisters" (168). Although Lalla, Doris and Mervyn are championed for "persuading everyone [they] meet into chaos", the work

finally concedes that there is a need for order. With the account of the storm at the tea plantation, for the first time in the work chaos is depicted negatively: lightning strikes the house with the sound of a "pistol shot", and by morning, there is extensive damage--"burned out fuse-boxes, knocked down telephone wires, chicken wires, dismantled gardens" (166-7). Susan is applauded for restoring order when the violent storm is over; similarly, the tea pickers are admired for maintaining a "precision" which would be "jungle in five years if left alone" (167). Running in the Family initially seeks to idealize anarchy but ultimately it is the world of order, harmony and permanence, represented by the "symmetrical efficient planting" of the tea bushes, that is described as "perfect" (146).

But this is not to say that in the code Susan and Sunil live by, Ondaatje has found a solution to the problems debilitating the family. What the Pereras represent allows Ondaatje to articulate what is wrong with family relations, but it brings him no closer to identifying a remedy. As Doris and Mervyn have already demonstrated, the Ondaatjes cannot live happily in an ordered, stable world. Although Ondaatje's daughter remarks that if they, too, could live on the tea plantation, "it would be perfect", we suspect they would be as wretched there as Doris was. Something has made them unfit to live in an ordered world. They cannot tolerate stability and harmony. This is a problem Running in the Family does not succeed in solving. Shirley Sugerman, in Sin and Madness, suggests the answer Ondaatje misses: we teach ourselves to be

intolerant of stability and harmony when what we are fearful of losing, we divorce ourselves from in a misdirected attempt to protect ourselves from vulnerability ("Madness: The Divided Self" 44-67). To overcome our intolerance, we must be persuaded that our values are worth suffering for. Psychoanalysis is one of the routes to a cure; it attempts to teach us not to feel threatened by our values, in particular, love, both the love we feel for others, and their love for us. We have to learn not to be afraid of being hurt by loving others or by letting them love us ("Narcissism Reconsidered: The Psychoanalytic Approach" 128-147). Ondaatje seems to intuit the need for this therapy in Running in the Family. He recognizes that he and his father should have accepted each other, and let themselves be loved by one another: "My loss," he tells us, "was that I never spoke to [my father] as an adult . . . I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens . . . Give me your arm. Give the word. 'Sweet Marjoram' . . . a tender herb" (179-80).

But no such love takes place, because, as Ondaatje tells us, "He died before I even thought of such things" (180). Perhaps this is why he calls the book "incomplete" (201). Had he and Mervyn had the opportunity to overcome their fear of love by establishing between themselves a nurturing relation, they both might have learned how to live in the perfect world of Kuttapitiya. Ondaatje grieves for himself, realizing he will never be able to relate to others as he

should, but he also grieves because he is haunted by guilt for having rejected his father, thereby "tormenting" him "over an imaginary cliff" (179). Feeling despised by his children, his wife and his friends, Mervyn retreated into a self-destructive narcissism, a self-love that was supposed to compensate for the love others denied him, but instead destroyed him.

It would seem that Running in the Family, like Coming Through Slaughter, does not arrive at a solution because Ondaatje has failed to understand fully the danger of narcissism. He does intuit that, far from being a strategy of self-preservation, narcissism is self-destructive, but the questions that remain in all his works suggest that he does not recognize as symptoms of narcissism the irrational rage, dark addictions, and paranoia that afflict his characters. The Collected Works is unable to account for the atrocities committed in Billy's anarchic world: "A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this?" the work asks, but does not find an answer. - We have seen that Hassan, Lasch and Sugarman have an explanation: rage and violence are products of narcissism.²¹ Just as Ondaatje fails to realize that violence is a tendency in the narcissistic personality, he does not realize that the ungovernable desires and addictions that plague his characters can also be attributed to their narcissistic nature. He has no explanation for the perverted appetite of Livingstone, in The Collected Works, or for the irrational, destructive passions that drive the characters in

Coming Through Slaughter. Bolden is afforded no explanation for "the awful thing among [them]" (99). He never discovers how "passion could twist around and choose someone else just like that," making Nora suddenly feel nothing for him, and making Robin "swerve" to him "like a mad compass" (99). Finally, Ondaatje's works never arrive at an explanation for the paranoia tormenting Garrett, Bolden and Mervyn. Again, an understanding of narcissism affords us an answer: as Lasch has explained, the world looks dangerous to the narcissist because what he sees is a projection of his suppressed rage.²²

Like Ondaatje, Robert Kroetsch and Audrey Thomas fail to appreciate that narcissism is a psychosis. As we turn to an analysis of their works, we will see that, like Ondaatje, they are brought to an impasse by the self-defeating arguments of narcissism. Furthermore, their narcissistic perspective has prevented them from responding to postmodernism with as much insight as other writers who have addressed the philosophy in their work, writers such as Márquez, Burgess and Pynchon.

Notes

1 Judith Owen has observed that "Billy . . . seeks or imposes order in the external world to compensate for a disintegrating inner world, a state which he projects upon the world around him ('I Send You a Picture': Ondaatje's Portrait of Billy the Kid" 119).

2 Ihab Hassan, Shirley Sugerman, and Christopher Lasch have described a self-destructive rage closely resembling that which Ondaatje writes about. If Ondaatje had their insight into the cause of this rage, he might be able to overcome the philosophical difficulties we will see that he is not able to deal with in The Collected Works, Coming Through Slaughter, and Running in the Family. Hassan cites Freud's explanation of this rage: "Guilt produces aggression toward the self. 'Every impulse of aggression which we omit to gratify is taken over by the super-ego and goes to heighten its aggressiveness (against the ego).' When guilt is swollen to an intolerable degree, aggression breaks loose. The ultimate result is either mass murder or mass suicide" (Radical Innocence 17). Lasch, also citing Freud, says this rage originates in the experience of rejection: we feel "rage against those who do not respond immediately to [our] needs" (79). This rage makes us feel anxious and guilty, and so we retreat into narcissism as "a defense against [these] aggressive impulses," "avoid[ing] close involvements which might release intense feelings of rage" (73, 81). We then project our rage outward, and as a consequence, the world

seems dangerous to us (81). (For a similar explanation, see Shirley Sugerman's account in Sin and Madness 135). Lasch sees a connection between self-destructive rage and fear of desire, a fear which haunts Ondaatje's characters. Again, Lasch's insight helps us realize what answers Ondaatje has not been able to come up with searching for an explanation for the destructive drives of rage and desire which push and pull his characters like "magnetic" forces. This is Lasch's explanation: "Twentieth-century peoples have erected so many psychological barriers against strong emotion, and have invested those defenses with so much of the energy derived from forbidden impulse, that they can no longer remember what it feels like to be inundated by desire. They tend rather to be consumed with rage, which derives from defenses against desire and gives rise in turn to new defenses against rage itself" (40).

³ As Lasch observes, in Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Beseiged, when "authority no longer commands respect, the authorities have to impose their will through psychological manipulation or, when manipulation fails, through outright violence" (184).

⁴ T.D. MacLulich has commented on Billy's self-defensive strategy of detaching himself from others through "emotional anesthesia" ("Ondaatje's Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer" 118). "Billy distances himself from many of the people he meets by interposing his gun and his

machine-like left hand" (107). MacLulich notes that "Billy seems remarkably indifferent about shooting his 'friend,' and is unconcerned over the cause of the death (some mixup)" (112). "Even in his love affair with Angela D., Billy is marked by an absence of emotion" (112). MacLulich explains that "Billy withdraws into emotional neutrality in order to avoid acknowledging his own susceptibility to emotional or physical weakness. In other words, he tries to retreat from inescapable aspects of his own humanity" (111). Perry Nodelman, in "The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid," notes Billy's "fear of involvement with women," and observes that "his dislike of sexual involvement and his need to distance himself from other people suggest a fear of his own body and the demands it makes of him" (72).

5 Shirley Sugerman, citing Kierkegaard, has identified the logic Mervyn is using here. As Kierkegaard has observed, "a person's identity can never be completely abstracted from others." Therefore, "the others can contribute to his self-fulfillment or they can be a potent factor in his losing himself" (Sin and Madness 51).

⁶ Lasch has documented this attitude in The Culture of Narcissism (30, 43).

⁷ Lasch detects this postmodern survival-of-the-fittest mentality at work in our society, and describes it as the "war of all against all" (The Culture of Narcissism 125). He claims that every aspect of existence--personal life, social life, politics, the working world--has become "anarchic and warlike" because we see ourselves in competition with all others--loved ones included--to survive. To equip ourselves to win the survival contest, we take assertiveness training courses and read tactical manuals in the art of social survival (126). According to Hassan and Burroughs, who, like Lasch, see us engaged in a desperate struggle to survive, we have adopted the attitude that all means of self-preservation are admissible. We have decided, Hassan says, that we cannot "afford to be choosy" (Radical Innocence 25). Burroughs says that driven by "the algebra of need" we will do anything to survive: "'WOULDN'T YOU?' Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do ANYTHING to satisfy total need" (The Naked Lunch 3).

⁸ Lasch documents this postmodern attitude in Haven in a Heartless World, noting the belief, widely held, that "all expectations, standards, and codes of conduct [are] 'unrealistic'" (140). He sees this attitude expressed in the "campaign to empty law of moral content" (186). The concepts of innocence and guilt have lost their relevance for us, he says, and therefore "authorities no longer appeal to objective standards of right and wrong" (187).

⁹ MacLulich proposes that The Collected Works be "construed as a warning against the dehumanizing consequences of photographic voyeurism" and "emotional anesthesia" (109, 118).

¹⁰ Lasch has observed this postmodern fear of desire and explains that our behaviour has become unpredictable because as authority has collapsed in our world, we have developed a "harsh, punitive superego" "that derives most of its psychic energy, in the absence of authoritative social prohibitions, from the destructive, aggressive impulses within the id. Unconscious, irrational elements in the superego come to dominate its operation" (The Culture of Narcissism 40).

11 The inverse of this fantasy is the postmodern nightmare of being overwhelmed by desire, a nightmare which points to one of the biggest contradictions in postmodern argument. The postmodernist both celebrates and deplores the possibility of anarchy: on the one hand, it represents to him an ideal state, the complete elimination of restrictions, but on the other hand, anarchy signifies to him a terrible loss of self-control.

12 MacLulich has raised similar questions about the reader's response to The Collected Works:

Much of the uneasy fascination exercised by The Collected Works stems from the reader's encounter with Billy's neutral or "mechanical" personality. . . . Ondaatje's readers may be tempted to forget ordinary standards of humanity in their fascinations with the minute details of Billy's bizarre experiences. But perhaps this temptation should be resisted. The Collected Works enforces a painful shift in the interpretative habits of many readers, who are accustomed to more conventional forms of poetry and fiction. Perhaps this distressed reaction is not simply evidence of philistinism, but indicates a healthy resistance to the emotional anesthesia portrayed in Ondaatje's book and so evident throughout

our society (118).

13 MacLulich describes the relation between Garrett and Billy this way: "Garrett and Billy are both trying to retain control over themselves in the face of an apparently random universe. However, Garrett succeeds where Billy gradually fails. Garrett is not affected by external circumstances: 'he had the ability to kill someone on the street walk back and finish a joke' (p. 28). Garrett and Billy are alike in being killers. But Garrett has fully mastered himself; whereas Billy has not. Garrett seems to be Billy's anti-self....." (110).

14 MacLulich presents a similar argument: "The principal action of The Collected Works is not the confrontation between Garrett and Billy, but the gradual disintegration of Billy's defenses against his own discontent with the world. His detachment from experience gradually breaks down, until at the moment of his death he is forced to confront his own physical and emotional limitations--his human mortality" (115).

15 MacLulich interprets Billy's relation with the Chisums very differently: "Billy's long evenings of conversation with John and Sallie Chisum (which we only hear about and do not witness directly) may not represent a comfortable friendship, but constitute a stage in Billy's withdrawal from society (114). This interpretation overlooks the symbolic meaning of the Chisum ranch as a place of healing, and stable community.

16 MacLulich notes that "in his last moments Billy acknowledges the destructive potential of a mechanized, rational personality" and "acknowledges his own organic nature" (116).

17 Consider, for example, this passage describing Bolden's relation with his children:

His day had begun at 7 when he walked the kids a mile to school buying them breakfast along the way at the fruit stands. A half hour's walk and another 30 minutes for them to sit on the embankment and eat the huge meal of fruit. He taught them all he was thinking of or had heard, all he knew at the moment, treating them as adults, joking and teasing them with tall tales which they learned to sift down to the real. He gave himself completely to them during

the walk, no barriers as they walked down the washed empty streets one on either side, their thin cool hands each holding onto a finger of his (13).

18 It is significant that in Ondaatje's fictitious accounts of Bolden, the musician is remembered as irresponsible, unethical and untrustworthy. "I know he was important," T. Jones says, indignantly, "but he was also sick and crazy..." (155). Armstrong is supposed to have told historians that Bolden "went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy" (134). Brock Mumford gives this unfavourable account of Buddy:

He was impossible during that time, before he went . . . A lot of fuss about Buddy at this time. Band was breaking up and I was being used as the go-between, made to decide who was being unfair THIS time THAT time. So I just stopped going out during the day cos I'd be sure to run into one of them. Buddy was always shouting. In any argument he'd try to overpower you with yelling . . . You took anything away from him in those days and he'd either start shouting or would go into a silent temper. He was a child really--though most of the time, and this is

important, he was right. A lot of people wanted to knock him down at that time. The Pickett incident had made him unpopular. Buddy didn't leave at the peak of his glory you know (76).

But it is the account Cornish gives that contains the harshest criticism of all: "He had all that talent and wisdom he stole and learnt from people and then smashed it, smashed it like ice coming onto the highway off a truck. What did he see with all that? What good is all that if we can't learn or know?" (145).

19 Dr. David Jeffrey has pointed out to me that one would have to ask at this point whether the three claims Running in the Family is making represent a progression of insight or simply contradict each other. Is Running in the Family, like The Collected Works, leading us through an argument against postmodernism, beginning with a premise it knows is faulty, and then showing us what is wrong with that premise by gradually assuming a very different position? This does not seem to be the case, because the three different claims Running in the Family makes are not presented one after another, so that the work assumes a new position each time one of the claims is refuted. Instead, all three claims are

made at once: what we are presented with in Running in the Family is not an argument which moves from a false to a correct position, but an inconsistent argument that assumes more than one position at the same time. We can consider as an example the inconsistent portrayal of Lalla ("The Passions of Lalla" 113-129). On the one hand, Lalla is applauded for defying the law and morality. She is depicted as a hero when she hides from the health inspector the fact that her neighbour's cattle have Rinderpest Fever, when she and her brother conspire together to con a wealthy woman into marrying into their family, and when she lies to the police and helps a murderer escape. At the same time that this chapter presents her immoral and illegal activities as heroic, it contradicts itself and suggests they are in fact questionable, by taking pains to justify Lalla's actions with the argument that although they were wrong, they caused no harm. "Everyone knew she was lying, but it didn't matter," we are assured (123). Although she refuses to tell the truth in court, and insults the judge, her inappropriate actions will not have harmful consequences: "she continued to play bridge with [the judge] and their sons would remain close friends" (116).

The chapter makes a second contradictory claim when at the same time that it champions Lalla for defying the law and

morality to live by a code based solely on self-interest, it protests that she does, in fact, live according to traditional values, and makes the happiness of others her first priority. We are told that Lalla was "always determined to be physically selfish" and took "thorough advantage of everyone", yet at the same time, it is insisted upon that "all her life she had given away everything she owned to whoever wanted it" (119, 122). "She did love children", the work argues, but then goes on to relate that Lalla could not bear to hold hands with her grandchildren, and would abandon them in "the frightening maze in the Nuwara Eliya Park and leave them there, lost" (119). Similarly, if we examine the portrayal of Mervyn, we see that unlike the argument in The Collected Works, which begins by championing postmodern ideals, but with the achievement of insight shifts its position to argue in favour of traditional values, the argument in Running in the Family represents no such progression, but is an illogical celebration of both the upholding and the overthrowing of traditional values. While Mervyn's outrageously selfish and irresponsible acts are presented from a postmodern perspective as heroic, he is also presented from the perspective of traditional morality, Ondaatje arguing that Mervyn sacrificed himself for others, firmly committed to protecting friends and family no matter how much he had to suffer on their behalf.

20 In most instances, this strategy backfires, and the contradictory claims appear illogical and ridiculous, but other times, by distorting definitions, Running in the Family makes contradictions appear to be consistencies. By distorting the definition of fidelity, for example, praising its characters for cheating on their husbands and wives, while remaining absolutely faithful to their lovers, Running in the Family, is able to champion both promiscuity and commitment in love: "Love affairs rainbowed over marriages and lasted forever--so it often seemed that marriage was the greater infidelity" (53). Similarly, in an irresponsible confusion of opposites, injury is made to look like protection, and destructive self-indulgence like sacrifice. This is accomplished by distorting the definition of heroism: the work glorifies the self-indulgent and irresponsible antics of Mervyn as heroic, but at the same time claims he was a hero because he suffered for the sake of others. Mervyn had some very dark experiences because he could not control his own behaviour, but we are asked to believe that his horrible confrontations with the darkness spared others from having to make the same journey. In this way, the work arrives at a very perverted justification of the suffering Mervyn inflicted on his friends and family when he made his dark descents into self-indulgence.

21 See note 2.

22 See note 2.

Violence of Story and Violence in Story:

The Problematic Response to Postmodernism in the Fiction of Robert Kroetsch

In his "carnavalesque" novels, Robert Kroetsch has tried to solve both literary and philosophical problems with solutions postmodernism has proposed: anarchy and violence.¹ While both his critics and Kroetsch himself have been able to demonstrate that the principles of violence and anarchy can be applied to writing to achieve important technical breakthroughs, they have not concerned themselves with whether or not Kroetsch has found in anarchy and violence a philosophical alternative to a world governed by laws and morals.²

Thwarted early in his career by the limitations realism placed on him, Kroetsch saw in postmodern aesthetics a way around those limitations. Postmodernism argues that the writer must "do violence to literary form": Kroetsch sees himself as postmodern because he "deconstructs" literary conventions, especially the conventions of realism, making the act of writing "anarchic", a "carnivalization" of literature ("The Exploding Porcupine," Enright and Cooley 28, Newman and Wilson 31, 92, 126, "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation"). By "destroying to tell the story anew" Kroetsch is able to say in The Studhorse Man, Gone Indian, Badlands, What the Crow Said and Alibi what he had been prevented from stating in his earliest novels. We sense a strain in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring as

Kroetsch tries to depict experiences outside the range of realism, a strain not present in his later works. Realism proved most unaccommodating to Kroetsch when he tried to depict the experiences of death and love. If we contrast his treatment of death in the early novels The Words of My Roaring and But We Are Exiles with his depiction of death in two later works, Badlands and What the Crow Said, we can see that learning to "do violence" to literary form enabled Kroetsch to define death as both tragic and absurd, a definition realism cannot accommodate. In The Words of My Roaring his portrayal of Jonah Bledd's suicide is distorted, and the reader finds the episode bewildering and even embarrassing because he cannot be sure he is responding to it appropriately. Kroetsch has no trouble incorporating the tragic nature of Bledd's death into the realistic mode he is using, but the other side of the vision, the grotesque, absurd view of death, cannot be accommodated by realism. Therefore, the reader does not know how to respond to Backstrom's absurd vision of Bledd's corpse banging on the windshield. Just as perturbing are Backstrom's bizarre speculations about the state of Jonah's corpse resting at the bottom of the lake, speculations the reader is not sure how he should react to:

There it was, cool and light and safe on a hot day like this. A flower in full bloom, and the arms and legs like petals rising and moving and falling in the liquid air, the white of the plaster cast a conundrum

to perch and pickerel alike. The hair on end. (The Words of My Roaring 143).

Equally problematic is the tone of the passage in which Backstrom overhears children making a game out of Bledd's death:

They squealed at each other, "Guess what I stepped on?"

"A foot," somebody said.

"A thumb," somebody said.

They'd shout and scramble for shore. They scared each other by naming parts of the human body, which was something I did not understand.

"A kidney."

"An eye." (137-38).

Pulled out of context here, these passages invite us to laugh, but when we encounter them in their framework of realism, we react with a certain amount of indignation because in a realistic work, which views the grotesque as disgusting and the absurd as abnormal and embarrassing, the suggestion that death is humorous is inappropriate and conflicts with and threatens to undermine the other claim the work is making, that death is tragic.

Like the reader, Backstrom feels uneasy about his inappropriate yet irrepressible notion that Jonah's death is comic, and understands tears to be the only acceptable response to the suicide. Anna Yellowbird, in Badlands, has a

more sophisticated understanding of death, and therefore not only cries but laughs when she is told Tune has been killed. She can respond in a way that Backstrom could not, because Kroetsch, in his later novels, has learned how to "deconstruct" the conventions of realism, and can therefore present the grotesque, absurd nature of death as compatible with tragedy. We can appreciate what Kroetsch has achieved by contrasting the death of Jonah to the death of Tune, in Badlands. The reader is able to respond to Tune's death as both tragic and comic, because Kroetsch has found a form that allows him to claim that while the boy is beautiful and heroic, nonetheless his death is absurd. Although the reader of The Words of My Roaring finds unacceptable the suggestion that Jonah's death is comic, he has no difficulty laughing at Tune while he tinkers inexpertly with dynamite, singing even though he is about to blow himself to pieces. We have said that Backstrom's absurd vision of Jonah's corpse pounding on the windshield strikes the reader as inappropriately comic, but he does not object to Web's ridiculous vision of finding Tune alive, but then accidentally killing him:

Web went on driving the shovel into the clay, digging deeper, imagining that with one terrible stroke he would drive the blade into young Tune's face. Into his neck. The boy would sing out, mortally wounded, and Web would run screaming out of the coulee (Badlands 222).

The reader of postmodern fiction can laugh at pain, mishaps, cruelty and death because its carnivalesque form liberates him from the painful identification with suffering that realism insists upon. He knows he is being presented with an absurd world which, like the world of nonsense rhyme, is one in which there are no painful consequences. Again, it might be useful to contrast the portrayal of death in Kroetsch's earlier and later novels, taking for our examples the death of Mike Hornyak, in But We Are Exiles, and the deaths of two of Vera's husbands, in What the Crow Said. All of these deaths are ghastly, but we do not respond to each the same way. Because Kroetsch is limited by the realistic mode he is using in But We Are Exiles, his description of Hornyak's death emphasizes the horrifying and the hideous, and we are repelled:

. . . Hornyak had crawled, had kept on crawling even after his clothes were burnt to ashes and his skin was fried and his hair set straight on end and singed almost to his skull. But he kept on climbing, with the skin hanging off his fingers and sticking to the steel rungs(But We Are Exiles 103).

Rather than horrifying us, the description of Vera's husband seems comic: "The tall gangling stranger from the road gang was hardly more than a bag of bones, he'd been so dehydrated, so perfectly dried. He was for a moment a kind of dried flower in Vera's arms" (What the Crow Said 184). Similarly, the hideous is presented as humorous when the corpse of

Vera's second husband is brought home. His body is embedded in four blocks of ice, which, absurdly, the searchers have not arranged in the proper order, so that he arrives like a misconstructured puzzle.

Just as Kroetsch cannot define death the way he understands it when he obeys the conventions of realism, so too is he restricted trying to define love, which he sees as a form of death. Love as Kroetsch views it is too bizarre to be portrayed by realism. It is at once domestic and mundane, yet supernatural and mysterious; beautiful yet grotesque; bestial yet heroic. Kroetsch tests the limits of realism to the breaking point in The Words of My Roaring by trying to make it accommodate this vision of love. When realism finally cannot portray the relation between Helen and Backstrom, Kroetsch must transfer the heroic lovers to a romantic setting, the doctor's garden, and the shift in the novel from realism to romance puts a noticeable strain on the work.

For the other woman in the novel, Elaine, Backstrom's wife, realism is a perfect fit because there is nothing extraordinary about her. But although realism accommodates her in a way that it cannot accommodate Helen, we are dissatisfied. We feel the same way about the portrayal of the manipulative wife in Kroetsch's short story "The Yellow Prairie Sky": Kroetsch conveys the sense of a deep hostility between husband and wife in both works, yet at the same time, we understand that they are attracted to each other in a

powerful way that realism cannot depict. The love-hate relation somehow cannot be articulated by realism: Kroetsch must resort to ironic understatement to convey obliquely what cannot be expressed directly in the realistic mode.

Once Kroetsch learns how to "deconstruct" the conventions of realism, he is able to portray this love-hate relation: it takes the shape, in The Studhorse Man, for example, of the perverse fantasy of the animalistic relation between Hazard and Marie, and it is articulated in the grotesque form of Hazard's marathon in bed with the old, ugly, insatiable Widow Lank.

We have said that realism cannot map the dimensions Kroetsch gives love--he must create a world outside the one realism depicts: the garden world of romance to accommodate Helen and Backstrom, and the island world of romance to accommodate Peter Guy and Kettle. In these romantic settings, Kroetsch is able to express more fully the nature of love, in its heroic intensity, but it is not until his later works, in which the carnivalesque allows him to go to any extreme, that he can express the true dimensions of love. Jerry Lapanne and Marvin Straw are the ultimate expressions of Kroetsch's vision of love.

Violence and anarchy provide Kroetsch with a solution, then, to the problems realism was creating for him: "carnivalizing" the process of writing, he overthrows the law and order of literary "systems" that prevent him from saying what he would like (Neuman and Wilson 30-1).

But violence and anarchy have not proved to be the

answer to the philosophical questions Kroetsch asks in his work. Surveying his novels, we will see that postmodernism does not afford Kroetsch an alternative to the world he deplores, a world governed by repressive laws and morals.

Like the postmodernist, he believes that in an anarchic state, we could be heroes. It is when his characters leave the world of law and order behind to enter the world of carnival that they are transformed from antiheroes into heroes: Jeremy Bentham Sadness of Gone Indian is the most obvious example here; when he lived an ordered life, he was doomed to failure, unable to satisfy his wife, unable to finish his dissertation. Once he enters the world of carnival, however, he discovers heroic potential he did not know he had, winning the snowshoe race and being crowned Carnival King.³ Kroetsch subscribes to the postmodern theory that we have the potential to be heroes, but cannot realize that potential because the moral and legal restrictions we impose upon ourselves prevent us from maturing.⁴ This is symbolized in his novels by fathers that will not let their sons grow up, by police that treat citizens like children, and by wives that emasculate their husbands. Kroetsch's novels reflect the postmodern view of heroic potential Mailer has explained in his essay "The White Negro": man is "a collection of possibilities" which he cannot realize without first making himself a "psychic outlaw," that is, one who "dares" to step outside the bounds of law and order and decency to explore "that domain of experience where security

is boredom, and therefore sickness" (289, 277-8). Kroetsch's fiction sets up a contrast between those who sicken with boredom because they refuse to step outside the bounds of law and order, and those who are daring enough to become "psychic outlaws." In But We Are Exiles, Hornyak realizes that Peter Guy is trapped in a state of unfulfilling innocence and tries to show him how to mature by deliberately destroying the repressive order in his world through immoral and illegal acts. Jonah Bledd, in The Words of My Roaring, represents like Peter Guy the man whose life is antiheroic because he refuses to venture outside the "safe" world of laws and morals: unlike Backstrom, he does not take the train East to the unknown world of amorality, but instead takes a secure job on a train that runs a short distance out of town, but circles right back again.

Kroetsch's novels voice the postmodern belief that we have reached maturity when we have learned to overcome all inhibitions, and are prepared to do anything--even what legality and morality have told us is wrong--to gratify desire. Mailer explains that while the psychic outlaw is not necessarily a criminal, he is able to "envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth" (290). As Kroetsch's protagonists give in to their heroic impulses, and allow themselves to gratify their desires, they overcome their reluctance to perform acts morality regards as indecent, and the law regards as criminal. Dorf learns to be comfortable in his unconventional sexual relation with Manny and Julie, Hazard breaks one law after another in order to

pursue his heroic quest, and Jeremy learns not to feel guilty for deserting his wife, having sexual relations with his students, and evading the RCMP.

Postmodernism argues that overcoming inhibitions and gratifying desire is heroic rather than self-indulgent and perverse, because it is dangerous violating laws and morals, and is therefore easier to obey them. Postmodernism regards such obedience as antiheroic: this is why Mailer can call the hoodlum "daring" and the murderer "courageous" for being brave enough to "enter a new relation with the police" (284). We detect this attitude in Kroetsch's portrayal of characters such as Backstrom, Hazard and Web, who we are supposed to admire for having no regard for law and order, and of characters such as Jonah and Peter Guy who we are meant to despise for allowing moral and legal inhibitions to govern their actions.

It takes courage, the postmodernist argues, not just to defy law and order, but to confront our desires once we have dared to overcome our inhibitions. We must not only enter a dangerous relation with authorities, but with the dark self we unleash once we recognize and begin to indulge our most repressed desires.⁵ Surviving this encounter with the dark self is portrayed in Kroetsch's novels as the ultimate heroic accomplishment. Peter Guy becomes a hero when he finally succeeds in mastering his dark self, a feat symbolized by his act of throwing Hornyak's corpse overboard and assuming its place. William Dawe, in Badlands, fails the test: his

suicide represents his inability to survive his confrontation with desire.

Kroetsch subscribes, then, to the postmodern belief that we must free ourselves from legal and moral restrictions if we are to discover our heroic potential, but as we will see in a survey of his novels, he cannot commit himself entirely to this argument. Unable to accept the postmodern attitude that "individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State," he defines in his later works an alternative to the amoral world postmodernism would have us live in (Mailer 290). This alternative we will see is a new morality, and it would seem to afford Kroetsch the answer he was looking for: in Badlands and What the Crow Said, as this chapter will demonstrate, the problems of morality and amorality are completely resolved. But while the new morality Kroetsch defines affords Badlands and What the Crow Said a solution, it is not the answer in Alibi, his latest novel. While it answers the philosophical questions the work is asking, his concept of a new morality creates difficulties in a novel determined to adhere to postmodern literary aesthetics which say a writer must resist all "systems", including a moral framework (Neuman and Wilson 31). Kroetsch has said that as a postmodernist he wants to "avoid both meaning and conclusiveness", but as Ricou observes, "to do so must he not invent a new system, and therefore, ultimately defeat his aim?" (Neuman and Wilson 130, "Field Notes and Notes in a Field" 133).

In his earliest novels, apparently before he has

considered the implications of such a proposal, Kroetsch suggests that we reject morality, arguing that it is repressive, and works against nature to annihilate the dark self in all of us. This annihilation of the dark self is depicted in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring as unhealthy. Those like Peter Guy and Jonah Bledd who have repressed their desires so that they may live comfortably in the world of law and order are unnaturally innocent and hopelessly immature.⁶ Their moral squeamishness, which is really cowardice, we are told, prevents them from participating in life.⁷ Peter Guy cannot eat at the feast Hornyak puts in front of him; or have a relation with Kettle. Jonah is unemployed: on a symbolic level, this means he has no role in life, and therefore cannot participate. He realizes that if he had a certain kind of experience, he would still be employed--he would be able to participate in life. It is not work experience, but life experience that he lacks, the experience Backstrom gained by daring to confront an amoral world: "I should have gone East when you did," he tells Backstrom (19).

As the characters in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring stifle their heroic desires in the name of morality, and law and order, they are debilitated by a painful splintering of their identity. Because law and morality tell them they should not want what they naturally desire, they feel both repelled and attracted to the objects of their desire. Not only Peter Guy, but all men who see

Kettle, both desire and despise her. This is the way Backstrom feels toward his wife, and he wonders at Jonah who is not affected this way by the woman he loves.

To deal with the conflict they feel when what they desire both attracts and repels them, Kroetsch's characters learn to perceive themselves as two different persons, with opposite needs. But this strategy only makes matters worse for them: in the double existence they find themselves leading, one self is always seeking to undo what the other self has achieved. Peter Guy manages to make his way a few miles up the river, only to be driven downriver again by his other self. Backstrom spends his days undoing what his dark self has done, and spends his nights destroying the work of his daylight self. As Rosemary Sullivan observes in her important essay "The Fascinating Place Between: The Fiction of Robert Kroetsch," "the novel works out the inevitable process whereby polarities mutually cancel each other out" (169). "The result is a total and terrifying irony" (168).

Desperate to escape this duality, these characters contemplate a kind of murder: one self must eliminate the other. Morality wins in Peter Guy's case, and he destroys his dark self, which he comes to associate with the drowned Hornyak. Backstrom, on the other hand, destroys his daylight self, an act he comes to equate with the death of Jonah.⁸

While Kroetsch can identify the problem with certainty--morality warps human nature by causing us to deny healthy desires--he cannot see his way to a solution in these two novels. He explores the possibility of doing away with

morality, but he rejects this possibility at the end of The Words of My Roaring and But We Are Exiles. Apparently when he was writing these novels, immorality presented itself to him as the only alternative to morality, and it was not an alternative he could accept, finally.⁹

We can trace this shift in Kroetsch's attitude. Initially, he seems quite prepared to entertain the notion that we must dispense with morality to realize our heroic potential. Hornyak and Backstrom are allowed to achieve heroic stature by committing illegal and immoral acts. Backstrom succeeds in winning heroic love in an antiheroic world because he has freed himself from the morality that hinders Jonah, the "good" man, and no longer feels obliged to be faithful to his pregnant wife. He wins at politics too, because freed from a sense of morality, he can avail himself of unfair strategies his opponent, Doc Murdoch, may not use. Hornyak feasts heroically while those who cannot transcend their antiheroic world go hungry and thirsty, because he respects no moral or legal authority, and freely violates laws and morals, exploiting the labourers who work for him, stealing the lover of a friend, and then cheating on that lover.

But neither Hornyak nor Backstrom is allowed to maintain his heroic course: evidently Kroetsch was troubled by the immorality of their actions. Although The Words of My Roaring and But We Are Exiles celebrate the unleashing of the dark energy in Backstrom and Hornyak, both novels end up

condemning the two for causing so much destruction while pursuing their heroic course. No justification can be found in either novel for this destruction, and both Hornyak and Backstrom are finally denied heroic status, while their antiheroic counterparts, Peter Guy and Jonah Bledd, are reluctantly proclaimed to be the better men. The resentment voiced in both novels toward morality gives way to the concern that immorality is dangerous. There is a sense of relief in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring when the chaotic, destructive energy of Hornyak and Backstrom is brought back under control, even though that relief is tempered with regret at having to reign in these would-be heroes.

There is further evidence that in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring Kroetsch is troubled by the idea of dispensing with morality to follow our heroic impulses: both novels are curiously guilt-ridden. Motifs that symbolize a haunting guilt recur in the works, the motif of the unburied corpse, for example: the body of Jonah come ashore to pound on Backstrom's windshield, the reeking body of Hornyak placed where none of the crew can avoid it. There is also the motif of an unsuccessful purgation: Backstrom failing to cleanse himself of guilt when he plunges into the goldfish pond, and Hornyak, Kettle and Peter ordered out of the hot springs before they can be made pure.

Guilt seems to have determined the structure of both novels: neither work can reach a conclusion because just when all complications seem to be sorted out, a moral problem that

has been avoided demands to be addressed. For example, Backstrom has to confront the farmer he has taken advantage of, even though the picaresque form of The Words of My Roaring would seem to suggest that the concern of the novel is to avoid addressing the moral implications of Backstrom's escapades. Although it seems that Backstrom will, like the picaresque hero, evade the consequences of his actions, those consequences all catch up with him at once.¹⁰ He manages to leave the auction without paying for the car he has bid on, and it seems impossible that he will ever encounter again the farmer he owes the money to. The story would seem to be over. But the man does reappear, trapping Backstrom in a situation so complicated that the conclusion of the story seems further away than ever. Similarly, reading But We Are Exiles, the reader is made to anticipate a particular conclusion, the completion of Guy's journey, but his expectations are constantly thwarted by moral complications that arise unforeseen, postponing Guy's arrival indefinitely.

But the guilt troubling these novels announces itself the loudest through conscience-ridden characters. Although Backstrom is able to disregard prohibitions and commit moral and legal offenses whenever he needs to, afterwards, he is haunted by guilt, when he perceives the contrast between his black bowler hat and the straw hats of the unemployed, when he sees his pregnant wife's swollen feet, when he remembers Jonah's broken arm.¹¹ Peter Guy tries to flee from his guilty feelings for not having been honest with Kettle, and

for not warning Hornyak about the danger of the lamp, but he cannot rid himself of his guilty conscience: this is symbolized by the corpse he cannot dispose of, and by Kettle's persistence in following him.

We sense in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring a desire to transcend guilt rather than come to terms with it by addressing the moral problems that surface in both works. It seems that comedy is being used in these novels as an avenue of escape: in But We Are Exiles we have what appears to be a realistic vision trying to become a comic one; by the time Kroetsch writes The Words of My Roaring that transformation is almost complete. What this shift from realism to comedy allows is an amoral vision that sanctions a rebellious disrespect for limits. As a comic figure, then, Backstrom cannot be condemned for being irresponsible, antisocial and immoral.¹²

But in spite of the license comedy gives Backstrom, The Words of My Roaring remains a guilt-ridden novel, its comic vision finally giving way to a sober didacticism. Backstrom then loses his comic immunity to punishment and censure, and stands accused of serious misdemeanors for which he has to pay. His punishment is the worst kind: not only must he fail, but he must orchestrate that failure himself. Hornyak, too, is made to pay heavily, discovering that he never had the comic immunity to punishment that he assumed he was blessed with. Like Backstrom's punishment, Hornyak's seems almost excessive because it is so cruelly ironic: Hornyak is destroyed by his own heroic energy. As further

punishment, he is humiliated, his corpse disfigured and left unburied.

Given the shift that we see occurring in both novels from realism to comedy, it would seem that Kroetsch meant to propose as an alternative to morality not immorality, but amorality. It was because Kroetsch did not know how to break away completely from the realistic form he was using that the heroic course taken by Hornyak and Backstrom is an immoral rather than an amoral one: realism reflects morality unavoidably.¹³ We can find more proof for the premise that Kroetsch was interested in exploring the possibility of not an immoral world, but an amoral one, in the interview Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson had with him. He explains to them that he bases many of his protagonists on Coyote the trickster because their nature is amoral: Coyote is "energy independent of moral structure and moral interpretation. He's very subversive, very carnivalesque" (100). Finally, it is well known that Kroetsch aligns himself with postmodern thinkers, and their ideal is an amoral world. As Mailer and Lasch have explained, postmodernists do not believe we can judge our actions as good or bad ("The White Negro". 289, Haven in a Heartless World 186). Smith and Smith have voiced the postmodern notion that we should judge experience (they refer specifically to sexual experience) in aesthetic--and therefore amoral--terms (Beyond Monogamy 38).

As realism gives way to comedy in Kroetsch's next two novels, The Studhorse Man and Gone Indian, a world governed

by morals and laws seems even more undesirable than it did in But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring. It is a postmodern view of order that we are given in these later novels which both claim that we are dehumanized by laws and morals (Mailer 277, Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism 272-4). The repressive Tad Proudfoot, moral and legal spokesman of Coulee Hill, does not regard Hazard as a human being, and in his attempt to force Hazard to marry into the world of law and order, he degrades him to the level of the subhuman. He sees Hazard as living like an animal, and thus denying that Hazard is human, incites the mob to attack him.

"This nut here," --he pointed his cane at the team, then at Hazard--"keeps horses in his house . . . Maybe you gentlemen live that way. . But I can honestly say that I and my sons don't. His goddamn house is full of creosote and horse turds . . . This crazy bastard is going to marry my niece. . . Just as soon as he gets his house ready for the bride. . . Look at the weasling bastard . . . Why don't you shave, Lepage?" He straightened Hazard's cap with his cane. "I'll tell you why, Lepage, my boy. You're too damned lazy. You won't work. You won't earn an honest dollar. With these men right here short of help. Why the hell aren't you in the army?" (The Studhorse Man 14-5).

Hazard is harassed until he is deprived of his very humanity: he behaves like an animal, howling and hurling bones as he is driven from a world which has become for him unbearable.

Like Hazard, Sadness is dehumanized by the repressive morality of his world, a morality enforced by men such as his thesis supervisor. He speaks the obscene language of those outraged by the degradation and humiliation they have been made to suffer at the hands of self-appointed agents of morality:

"Who are you, you pompous ass? Sitting there in your office in the Library Wing, chewing your cud, the grass you cropped off the green fields twenty years ago, vomiting it up into your own mouth, chewing it again. . . You with your goddamned go-get-a-job syndrome . . . Stick my unwritten dissertation-- . . . Professor Madham, I believe I called you a shithead of the first order . . ." (Gone Indian 19, 43).

Like Hornyak and Backstrom, Jeremy and Hazard liberate themselves from the moral and legal restraints repressing them, and can then set off on heroic quests. We have seen that although Hornyak and Backstrom rebel against law and order, they are finally restrained and punished for committing moral offenses as they realize their heroic potential. Hazard and Jeremy are eventually punished too for daring to achieve heroic status, but not because what they have done is immoral. After they are expelled from the world of law and order, Hazard pursued by an enraged crowd, Jeremy driven by his castrating wife and demoralizing thesis supervisor, they find refuge in a carnival world where

because the laws of nature and logic are not operative, the concept of morality is regarded as absurd.¹⁴ In this carnival world, Hazard and Jeremy find themselves being tried for moral offenses in courts that do not recognize the notion of moral offense as valid. Therefore, immoral behaviour is commended, and moral behaviour is condemned, and neither rewards or punishments are ever given out, court proceedings in this world being nothing more than a game. It is not a moral authority, therefore, that keeps Hazard and Jeremy from attaining their heroic goals.¹⁵

We have speculated that Kroetsch, writing But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring, was troubled by the immoral behaviour of his protagonists, and therefore could not let them attain heroic fulfillment. Kroetsch solves this problem in The Studhorse Man and Gone Indian: immorality is not an issue in these works because they are carnivalesque and hence posit an amoral world. We must look for a different reason, then, to explain why Hazard and Jeremy do not emerge as heroes.

Initially, there seems to be nothing preventing Hazard and Jeremy from becoming heroes, once they overcome the inhibitions that made them obey the law, and respect moral codes. When Hazard frees thousands of horses who then overrun downtown Edmonton, he rids himself of the guilt and shame that had inhibited him from undertaking his heroic quest to find the perfect mate for Poiseidon. As the horses invade the city, all the people of Edmonton are freed from their inhibitions too, and hold an orgy which Kroetsch

depicts as heroic. Jeremy, like Hazard, once he rids himself of inhibitions, can begin his heroic quest. At the airport, he cannot quite believe he has succeeded in shedding the guilt and shame that have been paralyzing him all his married life. The RCMP, symbols in Kroetsch's work of the inhibitions that stop us from being heroes, detain him as he guiltily tries to leave the moral world, but he discovers that their power to hold him is no longer effective. Thinking he will have to devise an escape plan, he realizes he is no longer being guarded, and simply walks away, free now to pursue his heroic course.

Almost as soon as Hazard and Jeremy attain the freedom to be heroes, they lose it again, this time not because they have violated a moral code, but because in the carnival world they think they have found refuge in, they violate the laws of amorality, which dictate that heroic effort must have no purpose. The world they find themselves in resembles the world envisioned by postmodernists, who argue that the only permissible heroic action is the meaningless gratification of desire. As Mailer explains, the psychic outlaw does not channel his energies into acts which affirm values, because he knows he must not have values (290). Instead he uses his energies in the pursuit of pleasure, an activity which he never allows to become significant for him.

Hazard and Jeremy engage in this pursuit, persuaded by sirens, but unfortunately, it is a pursuit that can be dangerous, and they are not equipped for it. They quickly

become addicted, when the sirens awaken in them insatiable sexual appetites. Hazard is eventually destroyed by his ungovernable desire, crushed by Poiseidon, who represents his rampaging sexuality. Jeremy is destroyed when he surrenders to Bea, no longer able to resist her. These images of death come to his mind as he satisfies his "last" hunger in her bed: "The sapsucker raiding the broken tree. The pussyfoot lair of the mountain lion. The treasure troll. The diver drowned. The snatching shark. The lava lapping, into the sea. At the volcano's lip, the sweet stench, the scorched charisma of the mountainous hole" (147). His terrible fall off the bridge symbolizes that he has been obliterated by his desire.

Jeremy and Hazard fare so badly in an amoral world because Kroetsch has not granted them the psychopathic insentience that the postmodern hero would have. Therefore, they fall prey to ungovernable desires, and are debilitated by horror and disgust. Jeremy is appalled by the boundless prairie, which represents a world undelineated by morality. He comes to realize why society values responsibility so highly, and seeks to punish those who are irresponsible, when his life is jeopardized by the reckless driving of the cowboy who takes him to Notikewin. He appreciates the need for ethical behaviour when he is dismayed by the irresponsible actions of Roger Dorck: "He was triggered into anger by that huge and awkward man, lying there so comfortable and at ease. He wanted to shout, 'Get up, Dorck! People are worried about you. Show some consideration. Get your ass out of the

sack'" (27).¹⁶

Hazard, too, discovers that he is terrified of amorality. He leaves the sinister, dark place for the homeless because he is frightened, feeling unsafe among those who cannot make a moral choice. He is horrified by Utter's act of burning down the schoolhouse to deny that morality exists. But he is most terrified of amorality when, at the pig farm, he is exposed to obscenities that leave him spiritually wounded. We can speculate why Kroetsch did not grant Hazard and Jeremy a postmodern immunity to feeling. Without it, they cannot survive, but the point both The Studhorse Man and Gone Indian make is that those who avail themselves of this immunity lead an existence not worth having. Madham and Carol's way of life is ignoble, hopeless, and self-destructive, we realize, given the picture of them making love in a zoo. Demeter prophesies that if we live according to the amoral philosophy of postmodernism, we will destroy ourselves: "Scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man would soon be able, in the sterility of his own lust, to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself like a rotting pestilence from the face of God's creation" (174).

It would seem that Kroetsch finds too radical the postmodern alternative to our moral world. Although The Studhorse Man and Gone Indian begin by celebrating the postmodern notion of anarchy as an antidote to repressive law and order, neither novel can approve, finally, of the mutation, to borrow Fiedler's term, that we would have to

undergo to cope with the violence and obscenity of an anarchic world. Badlands, Kroetsch's next novel, moves beyond postmodern philosophy to look for solutions more humane than the ones postmodernists have given us to the problem of how we are to realize our heroic potential in a world that effaces us with moral and legal prohibitions. By proposing as an alternative to our repressive moral code not amorality, but a new morality which advocates tolerance rather than censorship, and indulgence rather than abstinence, Badlands is able to posit a world in which heroes can emerge. In this way, Badlands is a breakthrough, the first of Kroetsch's novels that can proclaim a hero.

In Badlands Kroetsch challenges the postmodern assumption that the amoral man, because all possibilities are open to him, will transcend banality to live his life at a heroic level. Kroetsch argues that the amoral man championed by postmodernism will fail the heroic challenge of confronting his dark self as surely as the moral man thwarted by inhibitions. We cannot take on our dark self until we have acquired a particular kind of moral maturity, Badlands claims: most of the characters in the novel lack this maturity, and therefore fail on the heroic quest they have undertaken. McBride, Tune, and William Dawe fail the test outright; Web fares better, but fails in the end, nonetheless, but Anna Dawe and Anna Yellowbird complete the heroic journey. Arriving at the mountains, and thus "turn[ing] the Badlands upside down," they have met the heroic challenge of surviving both poles of experience, dark

and light. This has been Grizzly's achievement too: although he is part of Dawe's team, and therefore fails with the others, on another occasion he completed the heroic journey, reaching the river's source. Therefore, as the women recognize, he has no need to prove himself. As Peter Thomas observes in Robert Kroetsch, Grizzly is "fulfilled and fulfilling" (88). "No longer alienated from his source-self he is a taciturn witness to the absurdity of Dawe's quest" (89).

Grizzly and the two Annas can meet the heroic challenge the others fail at because they live according to a morality that makes them perfectly equipped to survive the Badlands. It is a morality that allows them to balance their dark and their daylight selves, rather than being ruled by one or the other. Although McBride, like Grizzly and the two Annas, lives according to a moral code, his is a different morality, and hinders rather than helps him in the Badlands. McBride adheres to the conventional moral code Kroetsch claims, along with postmodernists, makes us vulnerable in a dangerous world. His inhibitions hinder him in his effort to survive in the Badlands. This is symbolized by his need for "light" to "read" the water--much of their journey is in darkness, so as a helmsman, he is useless (Badlands 17). "I thought we were through the rapids," he exclaims, unable to chart their course because bound by the laws and morals of the daylight world, he has never learned to find his way around the night world (17). As they go through the rapids he should have known about, but did not expect, he is swept overboard: he

brings to the Badlands unrealistic expectations fostered by his brand of morality. Realizing he cannot stay alive in this world, he deserts the team to go back to the only world he can survive in, handicapped as he is by moral inhibitions--the domestic, safe world of his family.

Unlike McBride, Tune is too young to have learned the moral inhibitions that would hinder him on a heroic quest. But while he is too young to have become a prisoner of the daylight world McBride is confined to, he is also too young to have learned how to survive in the night world. He explains to Web that he had to give up his job as a coalminer: "It's not the work . . . I can stand the work. It's the dark down there. I can't get used to it" (85). Vaguely aware that he must condition himself before they reach the Badlands, Tune stays up alone to confront the night, but he needs a moral teacher to show him how this is done, and instead, is taught by Dawe, who leads him in the ways of immorality: Sinnott, recognizing that Tune has not matured enough to journey into the Badlands, warns him of the danger. "Don't let the dark out," he cautions the youth, but the naive Tune hears "dog" instead of "dark" and continues on his dangerous course (115).

Although Dawe would seem to be much more experienced than Tune, he proves to be as unprepared as the youth to confront his dark self. While Dawe may appear to survive the Badlands, he "dies" on the expedition, destroyed by his own desires. Years later, he commits suicide in Ontario, but he has already "killed" himself by making a fatal mistake: on

the expedition, he does away with his daylight self, rather than learning to balance it with his dark self. To go about eliminating the daylight side of his nature, Dawe renounces all his values by dissociating himself completely from the female, domestic world. The process he goes through to divest himself of values is the process we have said postmodernism would have us go through: Dawe has to undergo a dehumanization to leave his values behind. "Whatever the desperate reason that had taken him into that far place, he came back delivered of most of the impulses we like to think of as human," his daughter tells us, "He could survive any weather, any diet, any deprivation. And that was necessary to a man whose back bore on it a hump larger than any of us could see. But somewhere in the course of that first journey, that was his own--somewhere, somehow, he shook himself free of any need to share even his sufferings with another human being" (139). Anna Yellowbird, haunting him throughout the journey, represents his natural and persistent desire for humanist values. His descent into the Drumheller mines is a turning point--leaving daylight Dawe rids himself of values completely, and can make immoral transactions with Fekete. The death of Tune shortly after these transactions take place represents on one level Dawe's success in obliterating his daylight self.¹⁷

Dawe never realizes that by destroying the balance in his psyche, he has failed the heroic quest. Re-encountering Sinnott when the expedition team emerges from the Badlands,

Dawe poses for a photograph, draping himself with the rattlesnake he has helped hunt and kill, to show that he has realized his heroic potential. His gesture is ironic, because he has not emerged victorious from his confrontation with his dark self. Rather, his dark self has taken control of him. Once it has been unleashed, he is overwhelmed by obsessions, dark desires he cannot resist--an uncontrollable lust for Anna, an irrational greed for dinosaur bones. Even when he returns back East, Dawe cannot bring his dark self back under control. He lusts for his own daughter, and the irresistible attraction death holds for him leads him to commit suicide.

Dawe marvels that Web does not succumb to dark obsessions in the Badlands (198). Web's dark self is clearly stronger than his daylight self, and often threatens to take over completely, yet it never does because he is able to maintain an "indifference" to things to which Dawe becomes fatally attracted (198). We recognize this indifference as the immunity to desire that postmodernism sees as crucial to our survival. As postmodernism has it, it is only those with a balanced psyche who can remain indifferent;¹⁸ Web has learned how to balance his dark and his daylight self through his encounters in Drumheller with the green-clad temperance crusader and her sister, a prostitute. It is because he takes neither woman as a lover that he survives: to be seduced by either of these women would be fatal, as both represent extreme and therefore dangerous commitments. The temperance lady symbolizes the postmodernist's horror of

self-denial. She campaigns against the hedonistic lifestyle of Drumheller, a lifestyle we recognize as postmodern, urging the citizens to reassume responsibility for their loved ones, and abandon the pursuit of pleasure. She represents the morality Kroetsch, like the postmodernist, views as emasculating: we are reborn, she claims, when we deny the dark side of our nature, but Web observes that she sleeps in a coffin, and has reduced her lover to a skeleton.

Had Web been seduced by the woman in green, he would have destroyed his dark self, and created an imbalance in his psyche. Fortunately, her influence on him is counteracted by America's pull. America is just as dangerous: she would draw Web to the opposite extreme, unrestrained indulgence and subsequent addiction, the complete loss of self-control.¹⁹ Web leaves Drumheller without consummating his love for either woman. Thus he is prepared to enter the Badlands, loving both the dark and the daylight self equally, but a slave to neither. Because he has learned to balance the power of his polar selves so that neither dominates him, he is permitted a heroic experience in the Badlands, while Dawe is not. Dawe possesses an extraordinary energy, the energy of the dark self unleashed, but it leads him to a spectacular fall rather than a heroic ascent. While Dawe nearly plummets to his death when he goes over the side of the cliff, Web ascends to the sky, riding a tornado.²⁰ As he makes love to Anna Yellowbird, suspended above the mundane world, they achieve the perfect balance impossible for Dawe to attain,

the balance between Web's chaotic energy of the dark self, and Anna's ordering and constructive drives, the impulses of the daylight self.

Web's flight is shortlived, however, and he does not complete the heroic quest. Through him, we can see the limitations of the postmodern "hero": Web wanders off course because he is essentially an amoral creature, and is not interested in the heroic goal, the new morality Badlands holds out to us as a possibility. When Web burns down his father's shack, he exchanges a moral existence for one that is amoral: his life from that day on becomes a series of escapades with no consequences and no meaning--he goes from one adventure to the next, unharmed but also unrewarded.

Unlike Web, the two Annas are directed by a sense of morality which leads them to a heroic fulfillment Web could not find in his amoral and therefore aimless state. Their moral sense leads them to each other: both realize they have a dangerous imbalance in their psyches which the other can correct. Anna Yellowbird has had to wait for Anna Dawe before she could finish the journey she began but could not complete, when her daylight self died with Tune, leaving her with no way to keep her dark self in check. She becomes an alcoholic, unable to govern her desires, until she has Anna Dawe to act as her daylight self. Anna Dawe, on the other hand, is too immature to venture into the Badlands alone: having been kept a prisoner in the daylight world, she, like Tune, has never learned how to encounter the darkness. Because she is morally immature, she has almost been seduced

by her father's evil: she needs Anna Yellowbird to cure her of her obsession with Dawe, to turn her back before she goes too far (263). Balancing the dangerous extremes in each other, the two Annas know how to use the energy of the dark self to realize their heroic potential. That energy must not be "nailed in a coffin", as the woman in green would have it, nor can it be allowed to overwhelm the daylight self, as Dawe permitted it to. Having learned to confront and control the dark self, the two Annas have learned not only to face, but to love what they had feared most--desire. Badlands reflects the postmodern belief that we fear desire more than anything else. The terrible recognition of desire is symbolized throughout the novel as an encounter with a bear. Grizzly realizes his heroic potential when he has the courage to accept his desires, embracing rather than fleeing the bear he meets. The two Annas laugh instead of reacting with horror or disgust as they watch a bear being air-lifted from the mountain, his testicles hanging.

Postmodernists argue that because we fear desire, we suppress it, and then, so that we do not have to admit this, we rationalize, claiming that it is morally wrong to indulge desire. Thus, postmodernists say, morality is nothing but a smokescreen: moral squeamishness nothing but a disguise for our fear. This is the argument reflected in But We Are Exiles, The Words of My Roaring, Gone Indian and The Studhorse Man, but in Badlands Kroetsch alters his view somewhat. He does not champion an amoral acceptance of desire as more

honest than moral squeamishness, but instead defines a radically different moral position, claiming that it is morally irresponsible to avoid desire. Until we have confronted and mastered desire, Badlands tells us, we have not reached our moral maturation. The heroes of Badlands are those who have learnt, by a terrible confrontation with the dark self and its desires, charity, compassion and decency. Their ordeal also teaches them how to heal others of horror, grief and despair. Those characters who have not undergone the ordeal to acquire this wisdom have avoided their moral responsibilities. Dawe has perverted the purpose of the ordeal, unleashing the dark self to destroy. Web, amoral by nature, does not mature despite all he goes through, because he refuses to take on the responsibilities the Badlands has taught him to handle. Tune is anxious to assume those responsibilities, but is too inexperienced, and dies in a misdirected attempt to carry out his duties.

What the Crow Said, like Badlands, departs from postmodern thought to argue that the acceptance of desire must be a moral, not an amoral act. Learning to gratify desire rather than deny it, the characters in What The Crow Said do not become self-indulgent and hedonistic--by gratifying desire, they affirm values which ensure the survival of family and community, and they regain the human form they have lost immunizing themselves against desire.

What the Crow Said traces the gradual disintegration of a community which, in a misguided effort to preserve itself, denies desire. The inhabitants of Big Indian fear desire--

sexual desire, in particular--because they believe it is a power that will destroy them. In their minds, desire and death have become associated: when Father Basil gives a burial instead of a marriage ceremony, no one notices. For Vera, the association becomes especially unhealthy--she is sexually aroused by the bones of her dead husband.

Hearing Vera's cry, the people of Big Indian become so terrified of desire that they begin practicing a destructive kind of abstinence. Tiddy, although she desires Leibhaber, denies it, and refuses to marry him, pretending that she has based this decision on moral reasons: she is in mourning, she has to devote herself to her children. Her denial of desire is perverse: neither she nor Liebhaber can lead fulfilled lives until she relents. As long as Tiddy denies her desire, the passage of time in her world is unnatural.²¹ She gives birth to an abnormal child, the speechless J.G. Similarly, Vera, who persuades herself she is superhuman, and therefore invulnerable to desire, bears an unnatural child incapable of feeling want. Because she regards desire as bestial, she is unable to accept humanity, and misanthropically withdraws from others, refusing, for a time, to marry, and finding it impossible to relate normally to a man--when she relents, and takes a husband. Her own family finds it difficult to establish a relationship with her, and her son grows up a complete stranger to her. But Rita's response to desire is perhaps the most perverse of all: through her letters, she deliberately arouses in imprisoned men a desire she has no

intention of gratifying, and is careful never to read the letters they send back, letters which might make her, too, a prisoner of desire. Because of the abstinence of the women, the men of Big Indian cannot hope to gratify their desire. As Thomas puts it, "the worlds of men and women are fatally separated," and the men, too, therefore, begin to practice a perverse denial (101). They withdraw from reality into a game which allows them to deny the existence of both women and sexual desire. They refuse to be tempted out of that game, determined to remain invulnerable. But their denial is unnatural, and begins to dehumanize them. By the time they relent, they no longer resemble human beings:

They looked like a pack of scarecrows. Almost all of them were coughing. One or two at a time, they leaned over the side of the sleigh box, spat into the snow. They farted, and their farts almost warmed them. Their assholes were raw and bleeding from the combination of diarrhea and prairie hay that was full of thistle and buckbrush (100-101).

Denying desire is such a perverse act that the natural order of things is disrupted in Big Indian--there are blizzards in June, an invasion of strange bees, salamander plagues, drought and then flooding. The natural order is restored when those who have been denying desire discover a heroic capacity to accept and gratify it. In the working out of a mysterious design, Vera is persuaded at last to accept Marvin Straw, and in the heroic gratification of their desire

they transcend the mundane world. Jerry Lapanne, who has a part in the same mysterious restoration of natural order, acts heroically, inspired by his desire for Rita Lang. Even Vera's Boy, who is incapable of feeling desire or any other human feeling, suddenly wants to be part of a community, and makes a heroic attempt to save things. Tiddy, witnessing the mystery unfold, realizes how morally wrong she has been to deny desire, and sends for Leibhaber.²² What the Crow Said ends with a vision of a world set morally right because its inhabitants have learned to accept desire. Healthy relations have been restored between the male and the female population, and the Lang family is assured again of a new generation. The novel ends describing Cathy Lang, the "normal" one, who has never perverted her nature by denying desire, walking in the fields of a world that is once more hospitable.²³

What the Crow Said ends, then, with a very definite resolution: Kroetsch is writing from a clearly defined moral position which has afforded him an answer to his question about desire. It is because his position is so clear that the form of What the Crow Said is highly ordered. This design is especially evident in the ending of the work: unlike most of Kroetsch's novels, the conclusion of What the Crow Said is a highly structured design. Surveying Kroetsch's novels we have seen that with each work, Kroetsch's moral position became clearer and clearer; it is somewhat problematic, then, to encounter in Alibi, his next novel, a vision which is

morally ambiguous. Conventional morality, which is usually condemned in Kroetsch's work as repressive, is viewed ambivalently in Alibi: we sense this ambivalence in Dorf's relation with his sister Sylvia who represents that intolerant moral code which keeps us from following our heroic impulses. She regards the heroic energy of the dark self with horror and disgust. "Are you still under a cloud," she asks Dorf, reproachfully, failing to understand why he had to fire the gun at his ex-wife's lover. Like Hazard, Jeremy, and Backstrom, Dorf recognizes that this so-called "moral" code is inadequate and he rebels against Sylvia, convinced there must be another way to define "decent" behaviour. But his rebellion is no more than a "minor tantrum" quite unlike the obscene outrage of his counterparts in earlier novels (98). Alibi shows little of the postmodern horror of conventional morality that evidences itself so strongly in Kroetsch's early works. Quite the contrary, the novel often idealizes conventional morality: although Sylvia, as representative of conventional morality, harasses Dorf about his behaviour, she also provides him with the comfort he needs so badly, and is unable to find living by any other code of ethics. After she buys him an icecream cone, he kisses her--she is one of the few people with whom he can have an intimate, meaningful relation. She is the only one who cares for him while his leg is broken, and he is grateful for, rather than threatened by, her concern: "Sylvia leapt out of her own bed and got me undressed and tucked in safely and, burying herself in her own huge, heavily

blanketed bed, ready to turn out the light, she surfaced for long enough to throw me a kiss across the room" (85).

Equally ambivalent is the view Alibi takes of anarchy, the postmodern alternative to a world governed by conventional morality. We have seen that although The Studhorse Man and Gone Indian began by celebrating the idea of an anarchic existence, both novels ended by taking a moral stand against it, a stand maintained in Badlands and What The Crow Said. Alibi, too, condemns the postmodern proposal that we dispense with morality so that we can be free from prohibitions which would keep us from gratifying desire. At the same time, however, it celebrates that same proposal. This ambiguity, which is never resolved, is embodied by the problematic figures of Julie and Dr. de Mereidos, and the postmodern therapy Dorf takes, participating in a triadic relation with them. Both Julie and de Mereidos are viewed from a standpoint that is morally inconsistent. The reader is asked to disapprove of Julie because of the deaths she is responsible for, but he is also asked to regard her as a moral exemplum: she is the philanthropist who loves all men. Dr. de Medeiros is presented as an immoral, evil man whose stature reflects his stunted spirit, yet Dorf reminds us that the doctor is a healer, "careful with the injured of this lunatic world" (203). Because what de Mereidos represents is so morally ambiguous, the implications of his death are also ambiguous. Dorf may be guilty of a crime, or he may have performed an act of high moral purpose--both possibilities are suggested.

That Dorf's act may have been immoral is implied by his need to justify what he has done, and assuage his guilt. That his act may have been moral is suggested by the spiritual symbolism associated with de Mereidos' death: Dorf's bullet hits the centre of a mandala, and as the shot sounds, the ospreys fly for the first time, symbolizing the sadness that is lifted from Dorf's heart once he is free of the doctor.

Because their natures are morally ambiguous, the "cure" Julie and de Mereidos offer Dorf might be corrupting him or healing him spiritually. The cure seems to have had both effects on Dorf: on the one hand, he admits he cannot be cured by this sexual therapy which he describes as "violent" and "obscene"; on the other hand, he remembers his experience as a moral breakthrough: he has overcome his misanthropic attitude, and has learned to be his "total natural" self.

While the moral vision of Alibi is unfocussed in the parts of the novel in which Julie and de Mereidos appear, in the chapters depicting Dorf's experiences in Greece that vision has the same sharpness we see in Badlands and What the Crow Said. There is nothing ambivalent about the portrayal of characters in these chapters: whereas the reader can neither approve nor disapprove of Karen Strike in the early part of the novel, he realizes disapproval is the only appropriate response to her as she appears in the Greece episode. Whereas the "cure" Dorf took in Portugal seemed to be both a spiritual purging and a contamination, described in paradoxical terms as "obscene" and "outrageous" yet "healing" and "splendid", no such ambiguity surrounds his mud therapy

which is described unequivocally as wholesome (132, 130, 133, 130).

Alibi is unable to retain this sharply focussed moral vision: Dorf is expelled from Greece, where the moral order of things is so clear, and forced to confront the mystery of Julie and De Mereidos. The mystery is not solved: the climax of the novel presents us with the biggest moral ambiguity in the entire work: Dorf's violation. It is impossible to interpret the moral implications of his experience. Dorf finds it difficult to give the experience a name, and reluctantly calls it "violation." The word carries connotations of immorality, yet he suggests that the experience was, like his sexual therapy, a moral breakthrough. As he and his patients grope in the dark, they drop their narcissistic defenses and allow themselves to love again, willing to commit themselves to others despite the risk of being hurt by their love. It is not clear whether Dorf's "violation" is part of this communal act of surrender, or a crime committed by someone acting counter to the spirit that has possessed everyone else in the cave.

The aftermath of this episode resists interpretation too. It is not clear whether Dorf has acquired a moral sense through his experience, "violated out of [his] . . . innocence " or has been corrupted by it ("The Exploding Porcupine" 58). After his violation, he retreats to a hermitage in the woods: on the one hand, he seems to be leading a holy existence; on the other hand, he seems to have

relapsed into the misanthropic state he was in before he was healed in Greece. He is uncomfortable in the presence of men, and finds women intolerable (234). He would seem more incapable than ever of being able to relate normally to others. His moral state seems especially ambiguous when he thinks nostalgically not of the time in Greece when he learned to be at one with his fellow man, but of the time he spent in Portugal with Julie and De Mereidos. He insists it was a happy time, but we know it was a time of jealousy, anxiety and despair.²⁴

Perhaps we can account for the unfocussed moral vision of Alibi when we consider certain problematic statements Kroetsch has made in essays and interviews about how anarchy and violence should inform literature. In his essays "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Literature" and "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation" he does not maintain a distinction he himself has insisted must be made between the violence of story and the violence in story ("The Exploding Porcupine" 61, 63). We have seen that Kroetsch has a valid argument for violence of story: numerous critics have shown the validity of ~~that~~ argument, and Kroetsch has had no difficulty finding models that indicate his theory is sound: Sheila Watson, Robert Harlow, Ondaatje and Hodgins ("The Exploding Porcupine"). As we have established, Kroetsch's own works stand as proof: his earlier novels are less successful than his later ones, because they are too conventional.

Kroetsch's argument for violence in story, however, is

undermined by confusion. He has suggested that violence is a problem we cannot ignore; he cites Malcolm Lowry, who he says might be warning us in Under the Volcano that if we do not learn to cope with our violence, we will be cast into hell ("Carnival and Violence: A Meditation" 119). Kroetsch speculates that the violence of carnival might "offer some understanding of, some form of rescue from, our own extremes of violence" (119). But "some form of rescue" is too vague, and what is more, he admits that far from teaching us to control our violence, carnival might make us regard violence as unreal and comic. He suggests that we can perhaps interpret the antiwar demonstrations in the States as the ritualized and therefore "safe" expression of the violence of carnival, but he concedes that on the other hand, perhaps Cortes was able to destroy America because he saw his acts of violence as the ritual of carnival and therefore felt no responsibility for his destruction (119).

Equally unconvincing, because it is unsubstantiated, is Kroetsch's argument that violence is a force that renews through destruction ("The Exploding Porcupine" 57-58, "Carnival and Violence" 119). While he demonstrates convincingly that the violence writers do to literary form allows them to make important statements, he does not succeed in demonstrating that fiction which depicts an anarchic and violent world shows us how we might make our world inhabitable once again. He seems to confuse the violence of story with the violence in story at this point, assessing the

technical achievement of various authors rather than the vision their work presents us with. He praises Hodgins and Wiebe for violating "the set of conventions that supposedly shape story", but he does not demonstrate how their "apocalyptic" vision answers our questions about how we are to inhabit a world that no longer seems hospitable ("The Exploding Porcupine" 59). He commends Ondaatje and Thomas for performing "radical experiments in form" but he neglects to demonstrate his assertion that violence is an important theme in their work (60). Just when he is beginning to discuss violence as theme in Ondaatje's work, he digresses to examine violence as technique: after citing a passage from Coming Through Slaughter in which Bolden attacks Pickett, Kroetsch is about to comment on Bolden's violent nature, when he shifts his focus: "What makes the slicing off of the nipple a violent act is not simply the act itself. But more: Ondaatje refuses to give the scene a traditional beginning, middle and end. His refusal of form releases the experience of violence into the reader's experience of reading" (62). Having lost his focus on violence as theme, he neglects to address this issue at all when he examines Thomas' works, although he had proposed to look at violence in story.

Nor does he support the assertion he makes in "The Exploding Porcupine" that an anarchic vision in works of fiction affords solutions to the problem of violence, by "proposing an end" (57). He does not go on to define and evaluate the resolution he claims such a vision affords, but instead takes off ~~on a~~ tangent to discuss not the possibility

of ending that he says violence presents us with, but the very opposite concern, why we must resist endings in fiction: "Violence, physical violence, proposes an ending. Joseph, in Roch Carrier's Quebecois novel, proposes to end the anxiety he feels about the war. . . The theory of answers, for us, is a dangerous one. We must resist endings, violently" (57).

We detect a further confusion in Kroetsch's theory about violence in story when he tells interviewers Neuman and Wilson that he has a "very strong identification with that notion of a non-violent anarchy" (emphasis mine), and later argues, without defending his assertion, that the price we pay to live in an anarchic state is worth it (35).

It would seem that Kroetsch needs to consider more deeply the implications of violence in story. He has said that we pay a price for anarchy, but that any price is worth it if we can escape even temporarily from systems. Perhaps he needs to calculate the cost, to realize its dimensions. He has said that violence proposes an ending: perhaps he has not fully comprehended what that ending is. Finally, he needs to clarify the distinction between violence of story and violence in story. He could begin by abandoning the "grammar of violence" he uses in his criticism: in Alibi that rhetoric seems to have led him to confuse the metaphoric acts of violence performed by the writer with literal acts of violence performed by his characters.

Notes

¹ "Carnavalesque" is a term used by Kroetsch in his essay "Carnival and Violence: a Meditation" to describe unconventional works which dare to quest for truths the "Safeway" novel avoids, and "accept the terrors and the obligations and the necessary violence of that questing" ("The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction" 63). Kroetsch says that he has in mind Bakhtin's definition of "carnival" ("Carnival and Violence: A Meditation" 111).

² Robert Lecker, in "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic," evaluates Kroetsch's theory of deconstruction as sound and innovative. Several critics have attributed Kroetsch's literary achievements to his understanding of deconstructionism: Ricou, in "Field Notes and Notes in a Field: Forms of the West in Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins," Lernout, in "Twenty-Five Years of Solitude: What The Crow Said", MacKendrick, in "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," Lecker in "Freed From Story: Narrative Tactics in Badlands," Moss, in "Himmler's Got the King: An Essay on Badlands and Burning Water", and Thomas, in

"Priapus in the Danse Macabre" and Robert Kroetsch have demonstrated what Kroetsch has been able to achieve applying his theory of deconstruction to his work.

Perhaps although critics have concerned themselves with the literary problems Kroetsch has solved, they have ignored his treatment of philosophical questions because Kroetsch himself discourages that kind of investigation of his work. Asked by Neuman in Labyrinths of Voice if he adheres to any cultural or literary ideologies, he answered, "No, as a Postmodernist I resist those overriding systems just as much as I resist religious or political ones" (30-1).

³ It is important here to define Kroetsch's concept of "hero" because he does not subscribe to the romantic or mythical definition of "hero" or the modern definition of "antihero". "Heroes," he wrote in The Crow Journals, "are the real clowns of our world" (55). He views heroism as a marvellous yet comic transcending of human limitations. His hero, therefore, is as clownish as the modern antihero, but as unrestricted by the laws of nature as the hero of myth or romance: we laugh at the achievements of Hazard, Jeremy, Web and Jerry Lapanne, but we marvel rather than sneer, for at the same time that their heroic deeds are ridiculous, they are superhuman.

⁴ Christopher Lasch has identified this postmodern belief in The Culture of Narcissism. He cites Jerry Rubin as a spokesman for this way of thinking: Rubin, in his book Growing

(Up) at Thirty-Seven, recounts how he discovered his potential only after being "deprogrammed" so that he no longer felt compelled to obey the laws and morals he had been taught to respect since childhood (45-46). In "The White Negro" Norman Mailer implies the same argument, that we childishly remain in a safe world of laws and morals instead of maturely confronting the void.

⁵ Mailer describes the psychopath, referring specifically to the psychopathic murderer, as one who "has the courage" to gratify his desires (284). We can find this postmodern attitude, that it takes courage to confront our desires, in much contemporary fiction: in Amado's Dona Flor's Two

Husbands, for example, Dona Flor is transformed from antiheroine to heroine when she overcomes her fear of sexual desire. Burroughs' Audrey Carsons, in Cities of the Red

Night is brave enough to confront both sexual desire and the sadomasochistic desire for death when he tries the "elevator"

at the amusement park in Ba'dan, a "variation of hanging roulette . . . You start at the tenth floor with a rope

around your neck and drop down at express speed, and when the elevator stops a panel flips open and you get popped" (269).

Murdoch and Irving portray their characters as heroic enough to confront the desires, usually sexual, that they would rather avoid: Susie, in The Hotel New Hampshire is said to

possess a "complicated courage" for finally being able to enter into a sexual relation with a male, and Charlotte, in An Accidental Man, is applauded for her sexual relation with

a woman--"a younger Charlotte would have analyzed and considered and taken flight" (379).

⁶ In Robert Kroetsch Peter Thomas, who has written some of the best criticism we have of Kroetsch's work, describes Jonah as exemplifying "the life of responsibility, caution and dogged faith in the rightness of the social and economic order" (41).

⁷ Rosemary Sullivan defines Bledd's problem in slightly different terms: "While Backstrom embodies an energy so volatile that it must combust, Bledd embodies a control so rigorous it must also self-destruct" (169).

⁸ Sullivan also sees Backstrom and Bledd as "two aspects of one personality" (169).

⁹ Sullivan defines Kroetsch's problem in slightly different terms: "Kroetsch seems plagued by an inability to believe that energy can be incorporated without either destroying or being destroyed" (169). In But We Are Exiles and The Words of My Roaring, Kroetsch regards energy as immoral--in his next novels, he regards it as an amoral force.

¹⁰ See P.L. Surette's essay "The Fabular Fiction of Robert Kroetsch" for a detailed exploration of Kroetsch's use of the picaresque.

¹¹ Sullivan observes that "Backstrom is afflicted . . . with an 'oversized conscience'" (170).

While I speculate that The Words of My Roaring is guilt-

ridden because Kroetsch is troubled by the proposal the novel makes, that only by behaving immorally, can we pursue a heroic course, Kroetsch himself has given a very different explanation:

Backstrom's doing that I think, trying to justify everything he's ever done--even while he's self-deprecating. But sometimes it's just that terrible need to hear a voice, even if it's your own voice. It's also confessional, very confessional somehow or other. In fact, you know, of the various modes available, American writing so often becomes prophetic. I don't hear that prophetic voice in Canada. Yet we have the wilderness which traditionally seems to inspire the prophetic voice; instead Canada produces a very confessional voice . . . An American never asks himself, "Do I exist?" There they are wherever they look. But Canadians have this terrible fear that they'll look in the mirror and nobody's there" ("Interview with Russell Brown" 15).

Kroetsch's explanation--that Backstrom's voice is "confessional" because confession and self-justification are Backstrom's way of confirming he exists--is convincing, but it seems to be only part of the answer. Backstrom is having not just an identity, but a moral, crisis: otherwise, he would narcissistically accept his triumph over Murdoch, instead of deciding to go to those who have voted for him,

and admit that he had nothing to do with the rain.

¹² Peter Thomas says there is a shift in tone between But We Are Exiles and The Studhorse Man from "introspective agony to comic picaresque" ("Priapus in the Danse Macabre: The Novels of Robert Kroetsch" 288). He stresses that although the characters in Kroetsch's later novels act with the same disregard for laws and morality, "their comic presentation reorders the fictive consequences" (Robert Kroetsch 36). In his interview with Russell Brown, Kroetsch stressed that he prefers a comic vision because it is "agnostic," "without belief" (8).

¹³ An observation made by Peter Thomas in his essay "Priapus in the Danse Macabre: The Novels of Robert Kroetsch" is useful here:

It is self-evident that Kroetsch is fascinated by the sheer license of fiction--not only in accepting the "tall story" tradition, for which Backstrom is a natural subject, but also as release from the puritan prose of the Guy-consciousness. The limitations of the roaring-boy hero within a realistic frame are, at the same time, themselves obvious. There is just so much to be found in that surrogate rebellion (inoculated by comedy) the picaresque offers, unless it accepts its own anarchic logic. Within the realistic frame (however flimsy) the picaresque hero is confronted by the representatives of social order

in due succession. But there is no progression, no expansion, of the terms by which he is defined . . . The improbable, the untethered, unrealistic picaresque is its (society's) unadmitted dream of release" (291-2).

14 Thomas quotes Kroetsch as saying "Comedy tells you that there is no cause and effect, that chance operates against it. The studhorse--it's not moral or immoral" ("Priapus in the Danse Macabre: The Novels of Robert Kroetsh" 286).

15 Thomas observes that "Hazard Lepage, the hero of The Studhorse Man takes Kroetsch far from the repressed prose of his first novel...." (292).

16 Kroetsch himself has given a very different interpretation of Jeremy's experience. He tells Newman and Wilson in Labyrinths of Voice that Jeremy is made whole by carnival (37). It would seem that Kroetsch is confusing Jeremy's, debilitating experience of carnival with his own successful carnivalization of the novel. "So the carnivalization is what?" he asks, "It's happening to the characters, and it's happening to the novel. It's double" (37). But while his carnivalization of the novel is a form of deconstruction to build anew, the carnivalization of Jeremy's identity is purely destructive: he loses his old identity, but does not seem to acquire a new one, vanishing from the novel.

17 Thomas says that "Tune is the "son" Dawe sacrifices to

his own obsession . . . The Orphic has been destroyed by the narcissistic, the song is silenced. Dawe's notes . . . betray him, for they record the event with only the pinched and grudging, 'Dead. Tune. Dead' (224). Dawe cannot admit either love or the language of loss and rapidly approaching silence. By sacrificing the Orphic in himself and refusing the true descent, Dawe is left to his last speech: 'I have come to the end of words' (269)." (88).

¹⁸ This theme of polar selves recurs in fiction treating the postmodern problem of how to indulge desire without growing addicted. Amado's Dona Flor's Two Husbands is an obvious example: Dona Flor can maintain the state of indifference postmodernists regard as healthy only when she has two husbands, one to satisfy her need for order, the other to satisfy her dark self with its desire for chaos.

¹⁹ See Chapter 1, note 11.

²⁰ Thomas observes that "It is Web . . . who performs an act of sexual magic with Anna. Web is a thoroughly comic shaman, initiated in ignorance, unaware of what he has done, the clownish mask that Dawe, who does understand, albeit reluctantly, will not wear. He is the parody of Dawe's quest, its antic reproof" (90).

²¹ Thomas says that "births, deaths, marriages, the growth of children into maturity, take place in an elastic time-band which apparently leaves Liebhaber and Tiddy unscathed by age.

Years and seasons are arbitrarily dismissed . . . the effect is . . . to weaken the value of individual lives, to ignore their existential weight in time, to insist upon their expendability" (113).

22 Thomas says "This evident collapse into chaos, confusion, even apocalypse, is checked by Tiddy's decision 'to live for the moment'" (114).

23 The interpretation Thomas gives us of the end of What the Crow Said is radically different from mine. He does not see it as a nightmare world made inhabitable once more. For him, the ending is not a healthy restoration of order, but an undignified "crawl back to the womb" (115). I agree with Thomas to a certain extent: I feel that up until a certain point in the novel the world Kroetsch presents us with in What The Crow Said is "a matter of shit and silence." But once the community makes its crucial decision to accept desire, their world changes to one in which horrors such as those Thomas focusses on--JG, a "gruesome creation beyond farce", and the ghastly deaths of the husbands--would not have a place (114-5).

24 Linda Hutcheon observes that the "final words of the novel suggest some resolution, but it is one that must come from acceptance of ambivalence" ("Double Vision" 79).

Postmodernism and the Narcissistic Perspective
of the works of Audrey Thomas

The short stories and novels of Audrey Thomas voice the postmodern complaint that the traditional relations between men and women, and adults and children are unhealthy. Postmodernists regard heterosexual monogamy as a debilitating relation based on unnatural, perverted desires. Typically, they claim that it goes against our nature to be monogamous and heterosexual. We find this postmodern view of sexuality expressed in Beyond Monogamy: Recent Studies of Sexual Alternatives in Marriage. James R. Smith and Lynn G. Smith present the postmodern argument that humans are "multisexual and variably promiscuous, if not by 'nature' then surely by inclination when the restrictions [imposed by morality] are removed" (210). Albert Ellis concurs with them, in his article "Group Marriage: A Possible Alternative?" (170-3). Postmodernism goes on to claim that the unnatural restrictions heterosexual monogamy imposes on us have harmful consequences, which Ellis identifies as "restrictiveness" and "possessiveness" (176). Such a relation is, in effect, "emotional and erotic bondage," according to Smith and Smith (35). They argue that treating one another as possessions, both spouses create in each other a "whorelike dependence" (34). Postmodernists add that not only do we

make ourselves vulnerable, depending on loved ones, but we deprive ourselves emotionally and sexually when the restrictions monogamy puts on us prevent us from developing interpersonal relations. Smith and Smith claim that those who honour the conventional code of morality, and respect the restrictions monogamy imposes, suffer from "emotional and sexual malnutrition" (34). Ellis uses a similar term-- "sexual starvation" (176). He insists that "under monogamy

. . . a woman tends to marry at an early age and to have long-term relations with one man and a few children for the rest of her life. Her intense and deep encounters with other human beings, therefore, tend to be quite limited; by the time she dies, it may be questionable whether she has ever truly lived . . . And the same thing is true, although perhaps to a lesser degree, for the average male in our society" (179-80). One final argument postmodernism presents against conventional marriage is that in a monogamous relation, we are consumed by neurotic jealousy and "fetishistic" obsessions (Smith and Smith 33, Nena and George O'Neill 59, Bernard 154-6).

We find these same arguments in Thomas' fiction: it is perhaps the grotesque imagery used to define the relation between husband and wife that gives these arguments the most impact: in Mrs. Blood, for example, Isobel and Jason are likened to siamese twins (119), in "Galatea" marriage is seen as a mutilation: the narrator has "crippled" her husband "as surely as if she had cut off his toes with one of those

wicked-looking knives that she saw here on market-day" (Real Mothers 45).

One of the reasons marriage is an unhealthy relation, postmodernism argues, is that it is a dangerous venture in which one, if not both spouses, are bound to be hurt. We have seen that, according to postmodernists, one of the dangers is that spouses mistakenly assume they can expect a permanent commitment from their marriage partner: fidelity goes against human nature, postmodernists insist, and we are deluded if we think the ideal of a permanent commitment can be actualized. Bernard argues from this postmodern perspective that "exclusivity and permanence" are "incompatible": "If we insist on permanence, exclusivity is harder to enforce; if we insist on exclusivity, permanence may be endangered" (138). Thomas agrees with postmodernists that it is naive to think a permanent commitment is possible in marriage, and she shows us how harmful this naivety can be: her characters are devastated when they discover there is no such certitude in marriage. In "Crossing the Rubicon" when Sheila learns that her husband has a lover, she says, "I feel as though I've been walking around in a bubble for the last six years . . . and now, it's burst" (Real Mothers 159). In Intertidal Life, Alice breaks down when her husband deserts her, because she cannot live without guarantees: when she realizes she has been living in a void, and not a world of certainties, she is overwhelmed by horror:

She looked at him and he had, magically, moved back twenty

or thirty feet. There was an enormous distance growing between them. Like an earth fault, suddenly opening up, he on one side and she on the other. All kinds of things falling into it . . .

Terrified, she got up and began to walk up and down on the braided oval rug, making certain patterns which her feet seemed to know automatically. . .

"I'm over the edge, Peter! I'm over the edge!" (48-9).

That marriage cannot last forever is treated as a given, then, by postmodernists.² In Thomas' works, it seems inevitable that husband and wife will go separate ways. "Nobody married forever anymore," Rona announces as a matter of fact, in "Timbuktu," (Real Mothers 129). Her husband Philip has already been abandoned by one wife, and it is presented to us as only natural that Rona would leave him too (113-4). This same assumption, that marriage cannot last forever, is voiced in "Out in the Midday Sun": Frank has already had two wives, and between him and his third wife is "the tacit understanding that the line did not necessarily stop there" (96).

Postmodernists insist that commitment in marriage is an unrealistic ideal because we need "sexual varietism" (Ellis 178). Even though many of Thomas' characters are dismayed to admit it, they confess they have grown tired of their marriage partners and are sexually attracted to others. Isobel, in Mrs. Blood, no longer loves Jason, and wonders why she expected to love him forever, when she knew from previous

relations that she is sexually attracted to men for a short time only, and then loses interest in them. Tom's wife, in "Kill Day on the Government Wharf" is disconcerted when she realizes she is sexually attracted to the young Indian who uses her telephone. She and her husband are both becoming uncomfortably aware of the "sad and immeasurable gulf between them" and their efforts to bridge it are futile: although she refuses to eat the fish the Indian has sent her, and tries to compensate for her disloyal feelings with the "violence of her lovemaking," husband and wife are as distanced from each other as ever when they fall asleep ("Two in the Bush" and Other Stories 147). In Intertidal Life, even Alice, who would seem to be of all Thomas' characters the most committed to the ideal of conventional marriage, confesses that she has had affairs with both sexes.³

Marriage is inevitably boring, postmodernism argues, because the relation between husband and wife is completely predictable. Since boredom cannot be endured, according to the postmodernist, marriage necessarily becomes intolerable.⁴ In "Timbuktu" Rona claims her boredom is unbearable. She "has" to get away (111). Like Rona, Peter, in Intertidal Life, and Munchmeyer find marriage insufferably dull. They cannot stand the certainty and security that come from being loved, and long instead for excitement, change and even an element of danger in their lives. Munchmeyer is revolted by Martha because she is such a good provider. The wholesome food she prepares, the domestic tasks she excels

at, offend him. Alice has offended Peter the same way; he leaves her for unpredictable women who will not create around him a stable, and therefore unhearable world.

In Thomas' work we find voiced too the postmodern argument that it is impossible to commit ourselves to marriage without losing our sense of identity.⁵ Her characters see themselves as "vegetables" during their married life, and believe that they could not come into being until they escaped the relation. "The real meaning of Easter," the professor in "A Monday Dream at Alameda Park" realizes, once he is out of a marriage that "had nearly killed him," "is that resurrection is a possibility for us all" (206, 207).

Postmodernists claim that to keep our identity intact we must be independent, since if we relate closely to others, we become nothing more than their reflection. Conventional marriage, postmodernists claim, does not allow us to be independent: as they understand it, when we marry, we assume the identity of our spouse. This is Rona's experience in "Timbuktu": she complains that because she has no independence in her role as wife, she feels herself ceasing to exist. "I don't feel real any more. I don't feel as though I'm a separate person. It's as though there were some limb or a set of muscles that I'm not using, that I can feel shrivelling up, atrophying" (111).

Marriage also deprives us of our identity, postmodernism claims, by leaving us sexually unfulfilled: as postmodernists

understand it, we do not know who we are until we discover ourselves as sexual beings.⁶ We cannot make this discovery in a conventional marriage, they insist, arguing that we are by nature bisexual and promiscuous, and therefore cannot find our true selves in a relation which is heterosexual and monogamous. In Blown Figures, Isobel has become all but invisible, because her marriage to Jason has been sexually unfulfilling and has eroded her identity. She desperately needs the Dutch boy she meets on the ship to make love to her before she loses her sense of self completely. The professor in "A Monday Dream" had not been able to discover his whole identity in a conventional marriage because the relation left him sexually unfulfilled: in spite of the marriage he had been able to realize his intellectual self, but he had never been able to know himself as a sexual being. Thinking back on his first marriage, he asks "where had his body been during all that time?" (207). Peter, in Intertidal Life, has the same complaint as the professor: he insists he did not exist while he was married to Alice because theirs was not a sexual relation, and therefore, he had no sense of identity.

We have seen that postmodernism argues that by restricting our interactions with others, marriage locks us into a very unhealthy, unnatural relation with our partner. In Thomas' fiction the relation between husband and wife is depicted from this postmodern perspective, as a mutual dependence debilitating to both. In "Aquarius", for example, Erica stays married to a man she detests because she needs to feed off his pain vampirically. Her husband hates her, but

is her "captive" and cannot leave (Ladies and Escorts 12, 17). Isobel, in Mrs. Blood, sees herself as a Venus flytrap devouring Jason (107). But Jason consumes her, too. Isobel thinks of him as "fattening her up" before he eats her. In Latakia a mutual dependency is the basis of Michael and Hester's marriage. Michael has been careful to make Hester completely dependent on him: she is in a particularly helpless position when they are travelling through foreign countries, because Michael, who has learned other languages, does all the talking, and he appoints himself keeper of all their maps, tickets and room keys. She can go nowhere if he is not with her. But as Rachel realizes, Michael, because of his ego, is as hopelessly dependent on Hester: his ego, she tells him is "a very large dog to which you [are] irrevocably chained," a dog "which [is] constantly hungry. And Hester [is] the one who [is] always there with the Gravy train, even before the dog [begins] to whimper" (40).

Thomas offers various explanations for this unhealthy interdependence. In some of her works, it is men who are blamed for making dependency the basis of marriage: having never learned to sustain themselves, her male characters blackmail the women who love them into forfeiting their identity to take on the stifling role of nurturer. As Alice puts it in Intertidal Life:

"If - [the woman] is to move forward at all she has to develop a layer of selfishness--self-is-ness--that has

been traditionally reserved for men. But then the men, who feel 'despised and rejected,' accuse these women of being 'cold.'

"If you love me why do you neglect me?' or words to that effect.

"As though all the heat, all the energy of the woman had to be directed toward the man!

"And the woman, guilty in her own eyes, never mind the man's, weeps and asks forgiveness and accepts the man's point of view as the correct one--or the only one. She backs down and puts dinner on or else.

"It's like what happened to Peter and me. He encourages me and encourages and encourages me and then, when I'm really committed to writing, really flying around out of the nest a bit, he says, 'You're cold, you're calling the shots, you're neglecting me.'" (173-4).

In Latakia Rachel accuses Michael of the same thing:

Women are supposed to define themselves through the men they love: wife of the Prime Minister, mother of the priest. Wife of the rising young novelist. How you hated it if we went to a party or a gathering of some sort and I got more attention than you. I began to apologize (to you), to turn down invitations to do readings. . . It wasn't enough that I loved you mind and body.... (40).

But as well as this feminist explanation, Thomas offers a postmodern one: some of her characters are hopelessly dependent on each other because the sexual attraction they feel for each other cannot be resisted.⁷ Munchmeyer detests his wife, but he cannot break away from her because he finds her sexually irresistible. He thinks of her as "Death. The White Goddess. The flytrap" (59). Isobel realizes that she and Jason became trapped in marriage because of the sexual attraction they held for each other (Mrs. Blood 116). In Intertidal Life even after Alice and Peter have separated, they have to keep meeting because they are tied to each other by their sexual needs.

In Thomas' fiction, the postmodern attitude toward marriage extends to the family as well. Postmodernism claims that in conventional families, parents tyrannize their children, while children feed parasitically off their mothers and fathers, and even deprive them of their identity.⁸ Parents are depicted in Thomas' work as authority figures who repress and even terrorize or devour their offspring. In her novels, an image recurs of the mother as a gigantic, menacing shadow on the nursery wall. In "Aquarius" we find the postmodern notion of parenthood symbolized by the Mozambique Mouth-Breeder, her fry "struggling . . . behind the closed gate of their mother's teeth...." (14). We are told in all of the works that Isobel appears in that she has been traumatized by her mother's terrorism: she remembers dreading the moment Clara might throw the electric heater into the bathtub, killing her and her sister. She and Jane were

tortured mentally by their mother throughout their childhood: Clara accused them, in long, bitter letters she slid under their doors, of ruining her life, and terrified them with dramatic acts of violence, smashing mirrors and portraits, and throwing their Christmas dinner into the snow. Even when Thomas' characters have become adults, their parents continue to tyrannize them. Jason's mother contributes to Isobel's collapse by undermining her sense of self-worth; similarly, Alice is devastated by her mother-in-law's destructive criticism.

But while the children in Thomas' work are victimized by their parents, they, in turn, prey on their mothers and fathers. In Mrs. Blood, the unborn child is depicted as a parasite feeding off its mother. We are told that giving birth, the self of the mother is all but annihilated by the child who is given life at her expense:

They come out, if properly, head first and downwards, diving into life through the blazing red-ring of their mother's agony, as though through a hoop of fire. They are held up and admired and patted on the back as though they, and not the broken, spent thing lying on the table, were the heroes. . . . And the bloody thing in the bed or on the table smiles and forgets the horror and the outrage and holds out her arms to receive her violator, her hero, her fish, saying, 'This is my body which was given for thee. Feed on me in thy heart by faith and by thanksgiving'

(182-3).

Even as they grow older, the children in Thomas' fiction are depicted as dependent, and therefore a threat to their mother's identity. Isobel feels consumed by the demands Mary and Nicholas put on her (Mrs. Blood 122); Alice and Rachel, although they are loving mothers, feel their children hinder them in their search for an identity. Along with Alice and Rachel, Helen in "Real Mothers", and the unnamed central character in "Harry and Violet", complain that their children refuse to allow them to exist as sexual beings. This is a serious threat to their identity, for the assumption made in Intertidal Life, Latakia, "Harry and Violet" and "Real Mothers" is the postmodern one that we define ourselves by our sexuality.

To summarize, we can consider a passage in Mrs. Blood that epitomizes the postmodern argument against conventional domestic relations. The passage is a description of the unhealthy relations between Isobel and her husband, and between them and their children, debilitating relations based on values which have made all four of them vulnerable. Valuing security too highly, they have formed painful attachments to one another, instead of remaining self-reliant, and therefore, invulnerable:

Jason and I lusted after one another, briefly and beautifully, because we met in a winter when we both were lonely. Why couldn't we leave it at that? Why

did I insist that it was love? Why did I want a definitive scalp for my belt? Why is he not just a memory, like all the rest? Now we are linked together like some grotesque infant with two of everything except some vital piece--backbone perhaps. Our history prevents us from ever drawing apart: Mary, Nicholas, the past as "we," not he and I.

To shake hands and walk away swiftly in opposite directions--that would be the fine thing to do.

But that would leave Nicholas and Mary weeping, like the woodcutter's children, alone in the forest and prey for any witches who happened upon them weeping there.

Wedlocked to one another; and no keys.

People travelling in the same railway carriage rarely exchange addresses. Lovers should be like that (119).

Like Ondaatje and Kroetsch, Thomas is interested in the prescriptions postmodernism has offered us for "healthier" human relations. Her novels and short stories explore the various alternatives postmodernism has suggested to conventional marriage and the traditional family. Open marriage is considered as a possibility in many of her works. Her characters claim the right postmodernism grants spouses to live independently, to have a life separate from their marriage partner. While the professor in "A Monday Dream" lies sick in the hospital, his wife investigates Mexico

without him. Even when he is well again, they agree to spend their days apart. When he returns to the States, Laura will not be accompanying him: "they were very liberated, very liberal, in their attitude to one another. What was the point of their always being together?" (210). In "Timbuktu," although Philip objects, he agrees that it is Rona's prerogative to leave him to go on a journey she insists on making alone. In Blown Figures Jason approves of his wife's decision to leave him to return to Africa alone: "I know that I love you and believe in you," he writes, "that the journey you have begun is right and good--that the purpose goes beyond what you may think and that the results in the end will be positive for both of us" (18).

In addition to this independence, Thomas' characters claim another right postmodernism says is theirs in an open marriage: the freedom to have sexual relations with others besides their spouse.⁹ Laura accepts her husband's decision to establish a sexual relation with Rosario and Inez. Hester agrees to extend their marriage to include Rachel. Alice claims she would have been willing to form a ménage à trois with her husband and Anne-Marie.

Thomas explores in her work not just postmodern marital arrangements, but family arrangements too. The possibility of a communal family is explored in Latakia and Intertidal Life. In works such as "Real Mothers" and "Harry and Violet" Thomas defines how open marriage affects the dynamics between children and their parents. In "Three Women and Two Men" and Munchmeyer family arrangements even more radical than these

are explored: Margaret and Richard ask a friend into their marriage to bear a child for them, and Munchmeyer, who has left his wife and children because he resented the responsibility they put on him, assumes a very unconventional role in the Lodestone family, a role which allows him, an adult, to be nurtured like a child, without being required to give anything in return.

Thomas' characters must change their way of thinking before they can establish new marital and familial relations based on a postmodern code. They must learn to dissociate love and sex, so that they do not become emotionally involved with their partners. "Pure sex, without love," Munchmeyer thinks, "is maybe the best there is" (13). They must no longer think of loyalty and self-sacrifice as virtues, and they must adopt the attitude that nobody has the right to ask for commitment from another. "Don't tell me how to run my life," Michael warns Rachel when she violates the postmodern code by objecting to his plan to join Hester for Christmas. He reminds Rachel that she has no claim on him, that he owes her nothing. The divorced mothers in Thomas' work must stop assuming their lives are centred around their children: they must accustom themselves to being separated, at least part of the time, from their children. To break out of the traditional relations they have always been a part of, Thomas' characters must become completely self-reliant so that they are invulnerable to jealousy and the fear of being alone. They undergo various ordeals in an attempt to

overcome their fears, and they insist their children have painful, but, they feel, necessary confrontations with whatever they are afraid of. Isobel, in Blown Figures, forces herself to go back to Africa alone to come to terms with the insecurities debilitating her. Stella, in Intertidal Life, imposes on herself the ordeal of a journey back to California to face her lover's death. Rachel, in Latakia, refuses to allow herself to go home, after Michael abandons her in Greece, but makes herself stay and learn to overcome her horror of being alone. "For their own good," Jason, in Mrs. Blood, makes Mary and Nicholas take hold of the candles they are afraid of, and venture into the dark they find so frightening.

Many postmodern alternatives to conventional domestic relations are considered in Thomas' work, but none of them prove to be a solution. Those like Rona and Isobel, who leave their husbands to establish separate identities, are no better off on their own. Travelling to Bamako, Rona finds not a solution but a dilemma: she wants her freedom and Philip. She cannot detach herself emotionally from others, she comes to realize: in Bamako she depends on P.J. and in turn, the Weavers rely on her. In Blown Figures Isobel's journey to Africa intensifies her problems instead of solving them: far from regaining her sense of identity, she vanishes completely, "dissolving" as she gets further and further from her husband and children.

Just as the postmodern prescription to detach themselves from others fails to cure Thomas' characters, experimenting

with unconventional sexual arrangements proves to be no remedy either. In "A Monday Dream" Laura and her husband are hurt by their sexual encounter with Inez and Rosario; crying in each other's arms after the painful experience, Laura advises the professor to "let go of it" but it would seem he is not able to, for the next day he feels "tired and convalescent" and Mexico seems "unfriendly, cold" (214, 216). The characters in Latakia, "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" and "Crossing the Rubicon" are injured psychologically trying to live in a ménage à trois. Realizing that her role in the relation with Maggie and Patrick is masochistic, Johanna is able to leave them before she has been seriously hurt, but she has suffered, nevertheless. When Patrick tells her that Maggie has been crying, she informs him that she knows why Maggie is in pain because she herself cries too. The narrator of "Crossing the Rubicon" seems to have fared worse than Johanna participating in a ménage à trois. She is bitterly cynical about the experience, and her cynicism betrays her pain. When asked if she really lived with Sheila and her husband, she lashes out with, "Oh, yes, but I think we did it more for the sound of the thing than anything else . . . Ménage à trois. It sounds so nice, so civilized and sophisticated. Quite different from 'bigamy' or 'screwing two women'. . . Although, after a while, it sounded like ménage à twat to me" (162). As therapy, she tries to write about the experience, but she has been too hurt to confront her past directly, and instead of writing about what actually

happened, she invents a story about a woman immune to pain, who walks away from the ménage unscathed. Like the narrator of "Crossing the Rubicon," Rachel, in Latakia, writes about her painful experience in a ménage à trois as an act of therapy. She claims she has been strong enough to emerge from the experience intact, but like her counterpart in "Crossing the Rubicon" she betrays her hurt. She gives herself away when she tells us she is seeking revenge for her injuries, and when she is unable to sustain her callous, cool tone, and vents her feelings of anger and pain, calling Michael "the egotist, the liar, the hypocrite, the coward" (35). Although she attempts to convince us she is tough by using coarse expressions, we hear her bitterness: "the ass is always greener on the other side," she quips, but her flippancy does not fool us (20). She has not fared as well as she would have us believe: at one point, she was so overwhelmed, she felt like killing herself (53).

In Thomas' fiction, the homosexual relation, like the ménage à trois, fails to prove itself a healthier alternative to heterosexual monogamy. In "A Monday Dream" the professor is hurt psychologically by his sexual encounter with Rosario. Alice, in Intertidal Life, is not injured by her homosexual experience with Selene, but she has not gained anything by it, either. It has not raised her level of self-esteem--she cannot talk about the experience comfortably--and it has not cured either her or Selene of their pain. Alice has not succeeded in comforting Selene as either a mother or a lover, nor has she herself been fulfilled sexually or sustained

emotionally.

Experimenting with sexual practices which, although not homosexual, are certainly unconventional, Isobel, in Blown Figures, is seriously hurt by her postmodern experience. Persuaded by Jack to engage in sexual acts that she regards as abnormal, Isobel feels pleasure; but also horror and disgust. Jack, whose philosophy is postmodern, claims that by acknowledging her dark desires she will discover who she really is, but their encounters do not improve her sense of self--quite the contrary, her sense of identity becomes confused because she cannot relate to the woman Jack is turning her into (38-9).

In Thomas' work, it is not just the postmodern alternatives to conventional marriage that do not work, but alternatives to the conventional family structure as well. Helen in "Real Mothers" diagnoses as "almost incestuous" the traditional relation she and her husband had with their children, but the relations the children become a part of when their father leaves, and her lover Lionel moves in, seem far more perverted. Lionel threatens Marie-Anne with his sexual advances, treats Patty sadistically, and corrupts Clayton, teaching him how to use drugs. We are given a similar picture in Latakia: while Michael does not actually corrupt Rachel's daughters, he threatens them. Insecure and jealous, they become more possessive of their mother than ever, and do not attain the self-reliance postmodernism claims children would have in an "open" family.

But while Thomas can conclude in her fiction that postmodern prescriptions do not make for healthier relations, she seems reluctant to admit this. She seems especially reluctant to consider the possibility that the postmodern philosophy might be inadequate. Instead, she looks for other explanations: the code could be lived by, she insists in many of her works--"A Monday Dream", "In the Bleak Mid-Winter", Latakia, "Crossing the Rubicon", "The More Little Mummy in the World"--if certain Machiavellian individuals did not corrupt it to serve their own ends. In works like Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures, the defense of postmodernism is presented along somewhat different lines: the postmodern code should be lived by, but there are some who cannot adhere to it because they lack the fortitude. If the postmodern prescriptions for better relations do not work, Thomas argues in these novels, it is not the code that has failed, but those like Isobel who have not the strength to live according to their own postmodern convictions.

Assessing the failure of postmodern living arrangements, Thomas argues in several of her works that her characters find themselves in sado-masochistic relations not because the postmodern code of conduct is inadequate, but because Machiavellian persons expertly corrupt the code and pervert postmodern ideals. In many of her works she contrasts characters who honour the code with those who corrupt it, arguing that although her characters do not find happiness outside conventional domestic relations, they could have, if postmodernism beliefs had been practiced sincerely. In "The

More . Little Mummy in the World" although Rachel is hurt in the postmodern relation she has with her lover, Thomas does not seem to be condemning their "open" relation. Rather, we are led to believe that if the hypocritical lover had adhered to the code he purported to believe in, then he and Rachel could have had an ideal relation, the perfect alternative to conventional marriage. What he professes to want is a relation like the one postmodernists prescribe, in which partners retain their independence rather than trying to possess one another. Neither he nor Rachel is to make demands on one another, and they are to avoid a dangerous emotional attachment to each other. Both must be fearless and self-reliant, and not look for security in the relationship. This is what he claims they have, but as Rachel discovers, in fact these are not the terms of their relationship at all. While he expects her to take enormous risks, he himself takes none. When she finds herself with child, he insists the problem is hers alone. Although he promises to go with her to Mexico for an adventure, at the last minute he tells her she must go by herself, and she finds herself having to confront a nightmarish world alone. While he insists she has no right to expect emotional support from him, he expects to be nurtured by her: having denied her moral support as she goes through an abortion, he will not give her even physical assistance when she collapses outside the hospital, yet as soon as they are home, he asks her to prepare supper for him and his sons. He claims that in their

"open" relation he has the right to fulfill himself with other sexual partners, but he exercises this privilege not to have meaningful relations with other women, but to make Rachel jealous.

In "A Monday Dream" Laura and her husband are hurt by their sexual encounter with Rosario and Inez, not, Thomas argues, because they have ventured outside the bounds of heterosexual monogamy, but because they have fallen into the hands of "cruel, sophisticated" people who have "set them up for their amusement" (213). Laura tells her husband after the incident that this was not the first time she has been asked by a woman to make love, but that there was nevertheless a crucial difference between the two experiences: whereas Inez was manipulating her, her first homosexual partner was not exploitive. Postmodernism promises that those who experiment with unconventional sexual practices will find both pleasure and a sense of identity: Thomas argues that while such experiments might yield these rewards, this is not necessarily the case. A distinction is stressed in "A Monday Dream" between the relation Laura has with her husband, which does yield these rewards, and the professor's encounter with Rosario and Inez, which affords neither. Because Laura is sexually uninhibited, he is able to relate to her as a sexual being, in a way that he could not relate to his repressed first wife. Thinking that Rosario and Inez, like Laura, are sexually liberated he believes he will experience the same sensual pleasure he has known with his second wife. But what he takes to be a

healthy lack of sexual inhibition is actually, in the Mexicans, a perverted fascination with obscenity. He is horrified when they turn his sexual act into a bestial and violent performance. Likewise, he confuses Inez and Rosario's psychopathic ability to regard others as objects, with the belief Laura has taught him, that it is dangerous to be so emotionally attached to another that one seeks to possess that person.

In Latakia we find a similar argument, that what could have been an ideal postmodern relation turns out to be sado-masochistic bondage, not because the postmodern philosophy is inadequate, but because its code was not adhered to. In Latakia Rachel is blamed for "breaking up the ménage" but the culprits are actually Michael and Hester. Rachel has made every attempt to follow the postmodern code: she has not allowed herself to take precautions, and has risked everything to enter the relation, she has not tried to "possess" Michael, she has realized she must be "self-reliant", and although she has not succeeded in overcoming her feelings of jealousy in the ménage, she does not allow those feelings to affect her behaviour. If Michael and Hester had done the same, we are given to understand, then the three of them would have had a "mature" "liberated" relation. But as Rachel points out to us, it was not in Hester's interest to make the ménage work, and so she did not co-operate. She refuses to abide by the spirit of the laws governing a ménage à trois, threatening to leave the ménage

if Rachel becomes pregnant. She dominates in a relationship which is supposed to be based on freedom: as Rachel observes, "she was really the one in control" (100).. She admits to Rachel that she does not take the menage seriously: "she felt all along that [it] was just one of [Michael's] fantasies and she had come up to 'help [him] act it out'" (100).

What Rachel realizes is that it was not in Michael's interest either for the relation to succeed: it is only in a conventional marriage that he could be happy for he wants all those things postmodernism says we must not want: security, commitment, nurturing, possession. "How 'liberated' you insisted on us being," Rachel accuses him, "when you are the most jealous and possessive man I have ever met" (48). "Strange, how your swan song turned out to be security" (19). Although Michael purports to believe in a lifestyle we have defined as postmodern, as Rachel points out, he is committed to convention: "You have not chosen between two individuals," she observes, "but between two ways of relating to a woman. You tried the conventional way, and, obviously, found it dissatisfying--at that time--so you found me. But you are still too self-centred and weak-egoed to ever be able to make it with someone who insists on mutuality" (43).

The same pattern emerges in "Crossing the Rubicon" and "In the Bleak Mid-Winter": Sheila and Maggie, the wives in the ménages, deliberately sabotage the relation to have their husbands to themselves again, while their husbands eventually opt out of the arrangement because it is too threatening.

Both of them are intimidated by the "other woman" in the ménage because she is self-reliant and emotionally detached, and therefore cannot be blackmailed into giving up her identity to act as no more than a mirror to her insecure lover.

Thomas seems anxious to prove in works such as "A Monday Dream", "The More Little Mummy," Latakia, "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" and "Crossing the Rubicon" that it is not the postmodern code that is inadequate, but those who try to live by it: it seems important to her that the code be vindicated when its tenets have been violated. She punishes the Machiavellians who have corrupted the ideals of postmodernism, with censure and ridicule. Inez and Rosario are portrayed in completely unattractive terms, and dismissed as being unhuman. Patrick and Maggie are presented to us as utterly contemptible: Thomas' exposure of their weaknesses is ruthless--it is a cruelly sarcastic voice that describes Maggie's weak digestive system and Patrick's ego. In Latakia Hester and Michael are exposed the same way. Hester's martyrdom is presented to us as masochistic and servile: we find her disgusting, drinking Coke so Michael can have the last bottle of ouzo, repressing her artistic talent so that he will not feel threatened. Michael is treated even more ruthlessly: over and over we are given the same picture of him, looking utterly ridiculous and contemptible, stumbling back to bed after a trip to the bathroom, in nothing but a T-shirt that does not reach his navel.

In Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs. Blood and Blown

Figures again we see the postmodern code vindicated because its tenets have not been upheld. The central character, Isobel, is condemned for violating the code. Her excuse--that she lacks the inner strength to live by it--is rejected, and she is forced to pay for her transgression. In Songs she is condemned to work in a mental institute for having grown up in a "safe" environment in which she learned to need stability, certainty and harmony, and learned to fear the unknown and the chaotic. Her past is presented to us as a series of "crimes": one of her most serious "offenses" was to react with terror when her grandmother suddenly died in front of her and her kindergarten class. Her response is presented as inappropriate and deserving of punishment: she is accused for having wet her pants, and condemned to wear a pair of boy's underwear. But apparently this is not enough to expiate her sin: she apologizes for not having lived by the postmodern code while she was growing up, and offers to work in the hospital to make up for her offenses:

In many ways my upbringing had been as sheltered as that of a girl in a convent. It came to me that I knew nothing of the town outside of downtown (sic) the department stores and specialty shops, the banks and credit offices, the Presbyterian church, the library, the movie houses and a bit of the West Side.

I had always turned my head away from the blind pencil seller at the corner of Main and Chenango

streets. I had never seen a dead person, let alone a mad one (139).

When she cannot endure the obscenity that she encounters at the mental hospital, she apologizes some more: "o sorry sorry sorry," she cries when she is so nauseated and horrified by one of the patients that she has to run out of the room (165).

In Mrs. Blood Isobel is still apologizing for offenses she committed as a child and a teenager, not having been taught the postmodern code of conduct, and we are given to understand that her apologies are very much in order, and that her punishments are very much deserved. We are invited to despise her for having been so traumatized as a child by the sight of a decapitated body and a road streaming with milk and blood that she was unable to swallow for a week. We are asked to feel contempt for her because she fainted as a girl, when, while she was helping to prepare a corpse for burial, she accidentally clawed great strips of flesh off the body. Our scorn is intensified by her attempt, before she confesses that she fainted, to present herself as a postmodern character immune to horror. "I know the smell of death and I know the feel of death too," she boasts to us as she begins her account, and assumes a callous tone to secure our approval. She seems that much more contemptible in our eyes, then, when we realize this is bravado.

By juxtaposing these past "offenses" with Isobel's miscarriage, Mrs. Blood leads us to believe that her

suffering during this experience is also an offense; her horror, disgust and pain we are to interpret as inappropriate. This is not the way to behave, we are told: Isobel violates the postmodern code by not responding with indifference. It is not just through the strategy of juxtaposition that Mrs. Blood makes the claim that Isobel's suffering is offensive. The attitude of the other characters in the novel is that Isobel is not behaving properly, and the reader is forced to agree with them in part, at least, because the only other point of view we are afforded is Isobel's, and as she becomes more and more hysterical and paranoid, we realize her assessment of the situation cannot be trusted. Therefore, we find ourselves agreeing with Dr. Shankar when he voices the postmodern philosophy: "So. Sometimes life is sad and maybe a little bit unpleasant. You will not improve it by crying" (27). We find ourselves wanting to side with a friend of Jason's mother against Isobel when she prescribes indifference as the proper response to a miscarriage: "Oh, well, if it happens, it happens. I had a miscarriage at nine o'clock one New Year's Eve and went to a supper party later in the evening" (29). We sympathize with Jason rather than Isobel over the question of whether or not her fears of miscarrying are legitimate: we share his "polite incredulousness" when he asks her if it really would be dangerous for her to attend a party (154).

In Blown Figures Isobel still stands accused of violating the postmodern code of conduct, and is refused forgiveness, once and for all, and condemned to "death" by

the African priest who tells her her offenses are so serious she cannot complete the ritual of purgation that might have saved her. We are given to understand that violating the postmodern code, Isobel has hurt her loved ones: it is perhaps the vision the demons send her that convinces us of this most effectively: "she had suddenly seen all of them-- Richard, Jack, Jason, her mother and father, her children, her friends and relatives, everyone she had ever known and loved and hated dangling upside down from great black meat hooks, their throats slashed, their mouths open in a silent collective scream" (29). We are further convinced as the demons catalogue her offenses. The postmodern code demands that we be fearless, but Isobel is "afraid of everything." She has not only destroyed herself with her fears, but has "infected" her children. Postmodernism insists we must be self-reliant, but she has depended on Jason to such a degree that she has endangered Jason's life as well as her own: her husband has been "dragged down to the underwater depths where [she] gasped and struggled and thrust forth one frantic hand for help" (218). She is charged with having denied both Jason and herself an identity by being sexually repressed:

Why had they been so cowed . . . so spineless, so lacking in joy that they allowed themselves to become alienated from each other, to become mere puppets acting a role. (sic) It was as though the great sensual needs which had drawn them together in the first place, at the very height of their youth and

strength had had to be put to sleep as one might put to sleep a large unruly and utterly hopeless dog. "It was no good. We had to have him put down." To chain him up would not be enough--his howls would disturb the neighborhood--he might get away and crash through prize borders or run into the High Street and cause accidents" (215).

Postmodernism insists we must not make ourselves vulnerable by relying on structures that impose order on our lives, yet Isobel has persisted in clinging to those structures: "How arrogant you are," the "writer" who has created her complains, "with your demands for continuity and your fear of change" (159). Finally, she is accused of responding incorrectly to the death of her baby: she should not have allowed herself to be overwhelmed by grief, guilt and horror. "You are being stupid," Dr. Biswas tells her angrily, disapproving of her hysterics, "There is nothing to be afraid of" (35). "You must not weep now," the nurse insists, "It is finished" (177). Isobel is likened to those mothers who break taboos by not observing the proper ceremonies when their babies die, ceremonies which call upon the parents to ignore the dead baby, "dress in holiday attire, partake of ground-nut soup (to show that it was a joyful feast) and retire to their chamber and make a pretense of lying together" (323). Isobel has not taken the proper attitude toward her child, an attitude defined in tribal law: "the infant, for the first eight days after birth, is scarcely

considered as a human being" (324).

The need we detect in Thomas' works to vindicate the postmodern code of conduct seems defensive; we sense that Thomas, like Ondaatje and Kroetsch, is anxious to defend postmodernism because she has doubts about the philosophy that she must put to rest. And again like Ondaatje and Kroetsch, she seems to voice those doubts throughout her work, in spite of herself. Thomas seems dubious about the practicability of the postmodern code. In "The More Little Mummy," for example, she presents Rachel as one who has convinced herself that as a "liberated" "mature" person she should uphold the postmodern code, but who finds that acting in accordance with the code goes against human nature. She must repress needs that postmodernism views as inappropriate: she stops herself from buying her lover presents, because such purchases represent her need to give; she rebukes herself for crying on the lawn of the museum, giving in to her need for protection, and forces herself to enter the building to confront the disturbing truth the mummies afford. Although the short story presents her as admirable for refusing to give in to these needs, it calls the postmodern code of conduct into question at the same time, by implying that her needs are natural, and even healthy.

We hear similar doubts being voiced in "A Monday Dream." Like Rachel, Laura is presented as admirable because she lives according to the postmodern code, but in certain passages, the short story suggests, cynically, that Laura is

a self-deluded fool. When we are told that Laura has "only positive adventures". we hear a certain sarcasm: Thomas is using the vocabulary of postmodernism ironically (210). In later works, Intertidal Life in particular, she will use this device more frequently, ridiculing expressions such as "relate to", "flow with the changes," and "guilt trip."

In Latakia, too, doubts about postmodernism surface even though the work is attempting to celebrate postmodern ideals. Latakia purports to be calling upon Hester and Michael to account for themselves because they have violated the postmodern code. But it is not always Hester's and Michael's conduct that is being investigated--sometimes it is the validity of the postmodern code that is being called into question. "What's the answer for women," Rachel's friend asks, when they conclude that women, because they cannot detach themselves emotionally from others, are incapable of living by the postmodern code (73). Rachel observes the way of life in the Greek village, and decides finally that the code of conduct the villagers adhere to is her ideal, not the postmodern philosophy she has tried to believe in (55-6).

We find the same contradiction in Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures: at the same time that the postmodern code is defended in these works, it is challenged when doubts arise about its validity. Therefore, the reader has difficulty knowing where his sympathies should lie: he understands that he is to view Isobel with disapproval, because she has failed to adhere to the code, but he is also to disapprove of those who honour the code--

Jack, Richard, the medical students--because they are presented to him as cruel, even unhuman. Their reasons for living by the code are unadmirable and make us suspicious about the code itself--they adhere to the code to impress others and experience thrills. These reasons fail to impress us; therefore, on the few occasions that Isobel does honour the code, we are skeptical about the claim Mrs. Blood makes that Isobel has been heroic. She and Rosemary take needless risks travelling through Europe because they enjoy bragging about it afterwards, and because they consider it exciting. But we are contemptuous of Isobel and the postmodern code because her experiences, while risky, are also meaningless: what has she gained by intruding on a bizarre mass she was forbidden to watch, or by having tea with a pervert, daring to stay and hear his "proposal" instead of fleeing?¹⁰ The doubts about postmodernism voiced quietly in Thomas' earlier works give way in later works such as "Three Women and Two Men" and Intertidal Life, to open condemnation. Thomas changes her position, to reject postmodern philosophy, and espouse instead the philosophy of "self-is-ness". We have seen that in Thomas' earlier works the prescriptions postmodernism offers are defended as practicable but in "Three Women and Two Men" and Intertidal Life they are assessed as unrealistic. "One day Peter and Anna are going to wake up and discover someone's invented the wheel," Anna's mother observes, commenting on the postmodern lifestyle of her daughter and son-in-law. "Come and see me

in a few years, after you've had a couple of kids. We'll have this conversation again, okay?" Alice tells Selene when she fails to appreciate that those who are parents have certain responsibilities to their children that make it impossible to live according to the postmodern code (183). Besides the realities of child-rearing, postmodernism is shown in Intertidal Life to have overlooked certain realities of human nature. Counselling Alice on how she should respond when Peter abandons her, Raven gives useless advice, because he fails to take into account human nature: "don't freak. . . keep on loving (not grasping) what is offered you from his heart. learn to love it all" (104). He tells her she must acquire the "knack for non-attachment" (117). Alice, blessed with a great deal more insight than Raven, sees how he is able to believe such nonsense: "He and Selene would soon be back together. The knack for non³attachment was much easier to acquire if one were attached, quite firmly, to someone else" (117).

Those who purport to live according to the ideals of postmodernism are depicted in Intertidal Life as hypocrites. Alice tells us that although Raven and Selene seem to have achieved the objectives of postmodernism--a relation healthier than conventional marriage, a strong sense of identity, a state of fearlessness, an immunity to pain--in fact they "have the same fuck-ups" as everyone else (173). They self-righteously pretend to practice postmodern beliefs. As Alice points out, they are not self-reliant, but live like parasites off those who have what they need. They are not

fearless and emotionally detached--Selene has severe asthma attacks brought on by emotions she cannot control. Neither of them has a sense of identity, although they claim to know who they are, and so they travel restlessly from place to place, and experiment with Eastern religions trying to "find" themselves.

But "Three Women" and Intertidal Life make more serious accusations than these. Those who adhere to the postmodern code are presented as mentally and spiritually ill. Peter, in "Three Women and Two Men," is presented to us as an aggressive, disturbed man with "the voice of a psychopath" (148). He harbours inside himself "violence and safety catches barely on" (149). We have seen that in Thomas' earlier works, those like Isobel who could not achieve the self-reliance and emotional detachment postmodern philosophy calls for are defined as "neurotic," whereas a character like Johanna is able to live by the code because she is healthier than most, her ego strong, and her identity firmly defined. In Intertidal Life, however, self-reliance and emotional detachment are identified as symptoms of a psychosis. Alice suspects that Raven is an extremely disturbed man; she uses the word "psychopathic" to describe him.¹¹ When he glibly announces that he has a daughter the same age as Flora, but has no idea where she lives, or how she and her mother are managing, Alice assesses him as "fucked up" and we are meant to agree with her. Likewise, we agree that Peter must be suffering from a neurosis to be able to say that he feels no

guilt hurting Alice by having an affair with Stella.

Intertidal Life expresses concern, then, for those like Raven, Selene and Peter, who have no hope of being made well again, because they do not recognize they are ill. But the novel has more sympathy for those who will be hurt by people like them. As Alice observes, "it [is] as though they had had the moral equivalent of a stroke," (97), and their inability to feel guilt or compassion, along with their disregard for values, makes them a menace to the "real children in the world". (135). Alice and her daughters are victimized by those who live according to the postmodern code. Raven and his friends feel they have the right to steal from Alice. Left in charge of Alice's three children for an afternoon, Raven puts their lives in jeopardy when, while making candles, he refuses to take precautions, according to the postmodern code, and nearly burns the cabin down. Peter can abandon Alice and hurt their children without remorse. Stella and Trudi can betray Alice and not feel they have committed a moral offense. Alice herself, persuaded against her better judgement to adhere for a time to the postmodern code, hurts her children: when she is convinced by Raven that the postmodern views of sexuality are healthy, and that she should sleep with him, her children are distressed, especially Hannah, who is lost and confused, and needs to see confirmed the values she believes in.

Intertidal Life proposes an alternate philosophy to both conventional morality and postmodernism: Alice calls this alternative "self-is-ness." She wants a world in which

people behave decently and responsibly, and form loving commitments to each other, without forfeiting their sense of self and without being enslaved by a need for certainty. She wants a philosophy without the pitfalls of conventional morality: she has lost her husband and learned many weaknesses because the moral code she lived by taught her to be sexually repressed, overcautious, afraid of the unknown. But at the same time, she wants a code that will permit her and her daughters to hold a set of values, and love each other.

But when Alice tries to live according to her philosophy, she does not succeed in creating the kind of world she longs for. The failure of her philosophy is only implied--the novel does not explain why "self-is-ness" does not bring Alice happiness. The years go by, and Alice remains unfulfilled. She never finds herself in the relation she yearns for, a permanent commitment to a caring lover. Two of her daughters drift away from her, moving off the island to find lives of their own. She never finds friends to replace those who betrayed her. The last we see of her, she is utterly alone, her life threatened by a disease which is presumably cancer: at this point, we expect her philosophy to be assessed, but instead, Alice disappears from the novel, her fate undecided, her problem unresolved. It is as though Thomas has reached an impasse, and, unable to propose a solution, dismisses Alice--and her problem--from the work.

It is ironic that Intertidal Life ends at an impasse

because while she seems unaware of it, Thomas has proposed a way around that impasse earlier in the novel. Failing to recognize "self-is-ness" as narcissism, she overlooks the solution she herself has suggested. In her clear-sighted assessment of what is wrong with the postmodern code of conduct, Thomas explains the problem as selfishness. She sees the selfless Gandhi as representing a much healthier response to the world: "he had a cause greater than himself, much much greater--the unity of India, Home Rule. People like Selene and Raven seemed. . . to have given up on the world. They wanted to go back to a paradise before the fall. There was something very romantic, very narcissistic in their attitude" (97). People who live according to the postmodern code are described in Intertidal Life as "takers. They did not care to change the world or make it better. . . they just wanted to be left alone. Their favorite position was sitting down" (97).

While Thomas can present a convincing analysis of what is wrong with the counterculture, she does not seem to see that the philosophy she prescribes for Alice is based on the same assumptions made by characters like Raven and Selene. By retreating to an island, Alice is being as socially irresponsible as those she has judged as selfish. Alice should have partaken of her own remedy: she, too, needs "a cause greater than herself". Instead, she narcissistically retreats further and further away from others, first choosing to live on an island, away from the rest of the world, then eliminating the male sex from her world, so that she may live

in a "sorority", and finally, reducing the world to include nobody but herself, living completely alone, except when her daughter Flora comes to stay. Intertidal Life presents her as one who has been deserted: others have no interest in her, we are told: men her age are looking for younger women, and her older daughters have no desire to come to the island. What is never acknowledged in the novel is that Alice has cut herself off from others by isolating herself on the island in order to "be herself." In trying to affirm her sense of self this way, Alice comes to believe too firmly in her own alienation. She becomes preoccupied with the ways in which she is inferior to others, especially other women. She seems preoccupied with her inability to do handiwork: "Selene sewed without patterns and by hand. Beautiful as well as useful things. So did Anne-Marie," she thinks, contrasting herself with them unfavourably (170). "You're all so clever with your hands I'm jealous," she writes to Selene (150). She feels inferior to Stella who is "naturally sexy in a way that she, Alice, was not" (55). She contrasts herself throughout the novel with the "beautiful" Anne-Marie (153).

Like her withdrawal from others, her attitude toward her writing is narcissistic. Alice could, as a writer, embrace a cause "greater than herself" but instead she reduces writing to an act of self-confirmation, writing to define herself as something other than housewife.

To conclude, then, Intertidal Life marks a turning point in Thomas' career, because in this work she finally succeeds

in clarifying her attitude toward postmodernism. As a clear-sighted assessment of postmodern philosophy the novel is a convincing piece of social commentary, reflecting the same conclusions about postmodernism that sociologists have been documenting.¹² The novel is important, too, because Thomas comes that much closer to defining a code of conduct we can live by. Although her solution is very disappointing, her philosophy of "self-is-ness" having the same inadequacies as postmodernism, indirectly, at least, she has pointed to another possibility: living for a cause greater than oneself. Hopefully, in the works that may follow Intertidal Life, she will recognize "self-is-ness" as a deadend, and explore the possibility she sees Gandhi as representing. If she is to do this, it would seem that she will have to abandon her autobiographical writing, which appears to lock her into a narcissistic perspective.¹³ Her autobiographical novels--Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs. Blood, and Blown Figures--have allowed her to conduct a very thorough exploration of herself, an exploration that has afforded her part, but not all of the answer she is looking for. Any further exploration lies beyond herself--she must leave autobiography for a new kind of writing, a new kind of investigation.

Notes

¹ The postmodern argument that conventional human relations are unhealthy because they are based on dependency is discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation on page 14. For further reference, see Jessie Bernard's article "Infidelity: Some Moral and Social Issues," pages 156-8.

² Smith and Smith claim that monogamy "pushes as many persons apart as it brings together" (35). Permanent commitment in marriage they dismiss as an illusion, defining monogamy as "putatively normal but virtually fictitious" (6). Ellis does the same: he insists that "our 'monogamy' is honored more often in theory than in practice" (176).

³ Apparently Thomas is as reluctant as Alice to admit that her character has not been faithful. She minimizes the importance of Alice's extramarital affairs, in what seems to be an attempt to exonerate her: Alice's first affair "doesn't count" because her lover was engaged to someone else, and Alice loved him only "a little," and besides, he was killed in a car accident so "no one ever knew" (105-6). Her affair with Raven also does not count because he initiated the relationship, and her making love to Selene is excused as "something that would never happen again" (168). Besides, it had "nothing to do with sex"--"it was the mother in [Alice] that made her do it (167).

⁴ Gilbert D. Bartell, analyzing numerous studies of couples exploring alternatives to monogamy, says "what we find in

these couples consistently is a boredom with marriage" (196). Ellis argues that extramarital sexual relations are necessary to make the "monotony" of marriage "tolerable" (176, 178). This argument is implied in Mailer's essay "The White Negro": although he is not referring specifically to marriage, Mailer attacks all institutions because they lock us into a monotonous routine so that we are stricken with boredom, an ailment he regards as a serious illness (277-8).

⁵ The O'Neils identify this as one of the most serious problems inherent in monogamy: their subjects reported that in a conventional marriage, they could not "realize their individual potential without destroying the relationship" (59). Smith and Smith argue that it is only in a permissive relation that "the individual actor" can "grow, develop, and meet his or her varying needs" (100). See the introduction to this dissertation, page 14, for further documentation of the postmodern belief that we cannot retain our identity in marriage.

⁶ In his essay "The White Negro," Mailer voices the postmodern argument that it is through our sexuality that we know ourselves. Therefore, he goes on to argue, we must not allow ourselves to be restricted sexually in any way. We can deduce, then, that Mailer would disapprove of heterosexual monogamy because it limits our range of sexual activity. Mary Lindenstone Walshok presents an argument similar to Mailer's: "by affirming one's freedom from sexual restraint

one obtains a feeling of personal freedom; this, in turn, sustains one in the routinized activities of day-to-day living" (164). James W. Ramey, in his article "Emerging Patterns of Innovative Behavior" documents the postmodern belief that it is only when "open-ended sexual seeking" is permitted that we can retain our sense of identity. Ellis voices this belief when he insists that extramarital affairs are necessary to remain "sexually alive" (178). For further documentation of this postmodern belief, see the introduction to this dissertation, pages 15-17.

7 We find the postmodern belief that sexual attraction is irresistible voiced in much contemporary fiction, the works of Amado, Bainbridge, Burroughs, Irving and Marquez, to name just a few. The idea disturbs these writers: Amado and Irving treat the problem of irresistible sexual attraction comically, to reassure us we can cope with the problem, but Bainbridge and Marquez treat the question comically to heighten, not assuage, our fears. For Burroughs, the idea that sexual attraction is irresistible holds nothing but horror: he gives us a nightmare world of sirens and poisonous plants that awaken a sexual desire which is fatal.

8 See the introduction to this dissertation, page 15 for documentation of this postmodern attitude.

9 This is the assumption underlying the arguments of Smith and Smith, O'Neil and O'Neil, Albert Ellis, Alex Comfort, and James W. Ramey.

10 Anne Archer, in her essay "Real Mummies," concurs that the assertions made in Thomas' fiction are undermined by doubt. Archer focusses on one assertion in particular-- "There are no victims. Life cannot rape. There are no bad experiences"--observing that "the bulk of Thomas' narratives belies this uneasy assertion" (216).

11 It is important to note here that Thomas' attitude toward the psychopath is very different from the postmodernist's. We have seen that Mailer, a spokesman for postmodernism, views the psychopath as superior to the moral, law-abiding man because given the world we must inhabit, Mailer argues in "The White Negro," only the psychopath is equipped to survive.

12 A brief summary of the findings sociologists have presented us with may be helpful here in evaluating Thomas' assessment of postmodern philosophy. She arrives at the same conclusion as many sociologists: to live according to postmodern beliefs is to intensify rather than cure the ailments undermining human relations. Postmodernists profess to hope that permissive sexual relations will lead to open marriages, "open families", and, eventually, an "open world" (O'Neill and O'Neill 66). But sociologists studying the philosophy more closely detected a very different set of concerns underlying it: what the postmodernist actually seems to want is something quite selfish and antisocial: the immediate gratification of his sexual needs without having to

become emotionally involved with his partner/s. Those who have studied the phenomenon of wife-swapping, group sex, and communal marriage--all responses to postmodern philosophy--have discovered that many of those who experiment with extramarital bisexual relations are not looking for anything quite so altruistic as the perfect society. Rather, they hope to alleviate boredom, boost their egos, exploit others and free themselves of emotional attachments which they find threatening (Denfeld and Gordon, "The Sociology of Mate Swapping," Ramey, Walshok, and Bartell).

The aims of postmodernism in rejecting monogamy to experiment with other sexual practices are divided, then: on the one hand, postmodernism claims it seeks to "cure society", and on the other, it tries to gratify the needs of the narcissist. These aims are incompatible, and researchers have documented conflict among those trying to put postmodern philosophy into practice. Some postmodernists interpret the philosophy to mean that we cannot be fulfilled having but one spouse, and must use sex to establish a "network of intimacy" with others (Smith and Smith 95). Accordingly, they attempt to establish intense, meaningful relations with a number of sexual partners, and, in the process, alienate other members of the postmodern community who understand the philosophy to mean that sex should never be more than play. It is the belief of this second group of postmodernists that sexual partners should never be emotionally involved with each other. They believe, too, that esthetic, not moral concerns,

should govern sexuality (Smith and Smith 38).

Research also shows that those who blame their boredom on their heterosexuality or monogamous relation, and go outside these relations, for the "sexual varietism" postmodernists believe we all must have, do not find the fulfillment they expect (Ramey 119). Perhaps this is because the boredom they complain of is symptomatic of a deeper problem than unusual and exciting sexual experiences can alleviate. Postmodernism does not seem to consider the possibility that a single-minded, selfish quest for sexual fulfillment may provide no more than a short-lived sense of physical gratification, and leave us deeply unfulfilled because our more important needs are not physical but emotional and spiritual.

Researchers have explained that many who have experimented with extramarital sexual relations, particularly relations, begin to despise themselves, because they feel like prostitutes, or because they cannot repress the guilt they experience, having broken a taboo (Denfeld 265, Bartell 200). What many discover, then, is that they are not as open-minded as they thought. They find out that they are unable to overcome not only sexual inhibitions, but jealousy as well: many who think they believe in permissiveness find they resent their spouses having extramarital sexual partners

(Denfeld 265, Bartell 199). Finally, such experiments with permissive relations threaten those who feel intimidated by the emphasis postmodernism puts on sexual performance. Postmodernism insists that in a monogamous relation, we lose our self-assurance, but research shows that those who practice promiscuity are just as insecure, convinced that they are sexually inadequate (Bartell 199).

The same questionable assumptions that postmodernism makes about sexual relations underlie its notions of how the family should function: just as postmodernism believes spouses should not depend on each other, it believes parents and children also invest too much in each other, and must seek instead to be detached and self-reliant. And just as postmodernism deplores monogamy as a form of "bondage", it sees family relations this way too, and argues that children should not restrict parents with their demands, nor should parents exercise authority over their children. Lasch, who in his work Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Beseiged explores the consequences of these postmodern notions, has shown that this prescription does not help parents and children relate to each other any better (167-89). He documents that children of parents who have been careful not to allow strong emotional ties to develop between themselves

and their child, far from being independent and self-assured, feel insecure, and have trouble interacting with others. Believing that children who demand emotional fulfillment from their parents deprive them of their identity, postmodernism supposes that parents who refuse to entertain those demands have a healthier sense of self, and are more fulfilled (183). But as Lasch's study indicates, many of these parents feel unfulfilled because their relations with their children have been so meaningless.

Postmodernism supposes that as more and more individuals are freed from emotional "entanglements" with their spouses and families, they will have a healthier sense of identity, and therefore society as a whole will become healthier (Haven in a Heartless World 175). The postmodern formula states that open marriage leads to the open family, which leads to an open world. But Lasch argues that this is not what would happen. He challenges two of the assumptions postmodernism is making here: 1) that the self-reliant individual is healthy, and 2) that permissiveness leads to a freer, healthier society. Both Lasch and Sugarman have diagnosed narcissism as the ailment undermining society today, and they demonstrate that this ailment is a result of postmodernism's celebration of independence and self-reliance. While the postmodernist

sees narcissism as an excellent means of self-preservation, Lasch and Sugerman define it as a form of self-destruction. Withdrawing from others, the narcissist retreats into himself so completely that he enters a state of nonbeing (Sin and Madness 46). To compensate for what he forfeits giving up the love of others, the narcissist looks for fulfillment through self-indulgence. He does not find satisfaction, however, because the immediate gratification of physical wants does not alleviate emotional and spiritual longings. Obsessed with the pursuit of pleasure, the narcissist not only deprives himself of the emotional fulfillment he would find relating to others, but never allows himself to discover that there is a marvellous as well as a mundane level to communal existence.

Postmodernism is wrong to suppose, then, that the society it envisions would consist of well-adjusted individuals whose self-reliance makes them far less vulnerable than individuals in a society that encourages them to depend on one another. And Lasch goes on to reveal other differences between the world postmodernism envisions and the world he feels would come to be if postmodern ideas were put into practice everywhere. Postmodernism sees the individual as repressed by authority, and believes that in an anarchic

world, the relation between society and the individual would be healthier. But Lasch counters with the argument that in a lawless world, the individual would not be free from repression but subjected to "force, bribery, intimidation, and blackmail. The dissolution of authority brings not freedom but new forms of domination" (184).

¹³ Anne Archer, in her article "Real Mummies," presents a similar argument. She observes that "Thomas' work is . . . troublesome, because the recurrence of fixed motifs within one basic story induces claustrophobia" (215). She sees Thomas' characters as caught in a "vicious circle of self-reflection" and Thomas herself as plagued by "authorial myopia" (220).

The Works of Jack Hodgins as a Moral Response to the Philosophy of Postmodernism

When we survey the career of Jack Hodgins, we observe that like many postmodern writers, he moves away from realism as his work develops. In general, postmodern writers have abandoned realism because it contradicts their belief that human nature is capable of anything, and that in the realm of human experience, nothing is impossible.¹ John Barth sees postmodern writers as striving for a "post-naturalistic, post-existentialist, post-psychological, post-antinovel in which the astonishing, the extravagant . . . the heroical--in sum, the adventurous--will come again and welcomely into its own" (Olderman 16). Like the postmodernists, Hodgins wants to depict existence as "astonishing," "extravagant," "heroic," and "adventurous," and agrees with them that realism excludes these possibilities. "People who triumph or succeed even in small ways must be recorded in fiction too, though this is contrary to the tradition of modern serious fiction," he observes (Interview with Hancock 56). His character Larry Bowman echoes his frustration with realism: in modern novels "believers" are "made to look like fools, with empty hands" (The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne 139). Hodgins is dissatisfied with realism because it assumes we can be no more than antiheroes in a mundane world: what he wants to say is that our world is miraculous, and we, as part of that miracle, can do anything.

We can understand, then, why although Hodgins' early

work is realistic, he moves on to experiment, exploring forms at the opposite end of the spectrum to realism--forms many postmodern writers are investigating: comedy, myth and fantasy. What is unexpected is that having worked so diligently to find alternate forms, Hodgins returns to realism in his most recent work, The Barclay Family Theatre. This return is a withdrawal: Hodgins retreats in dismay from certain philosophical conclusions he is brought to, experimenting with form. When he set out, he did not realize just where his postmodern explorations would take him--into the realm of taboo. Most postmodern writers explore taboo subjects fully aware that they are violating a prohibition: Norman Mailer, for example, exploring the idea that the Hipster may perform any crime, even murder, if it allows him to discover himself; W.S. Burroughs, the possibility of transforming the mortal into the immortal through the sexual rites of black magic; John Irving proposing that we can "cure" ourselves by giving in to incestuous urges. The postmodern attitude is that nothing is outside the range of human experience--we should not have to respect the boundary taboo sets between the permissible and the impermissible.² Unlike most postmodern writers, Hodgins does not seem to know, when he begins his explorations, that he will be violating taboos. He ventures out of bounds, not because he feels he must rebel against moral and legal prohibitions, but because he thinks this exploration is his moral duty as a writer: he has said that it is the writer's moral responsibility to provide the reader with myths that he "can

look at to help [him] answer an unanswerable question" (Interview with Hancock 62).³ We do not have answers to certain moral questions, he maintains, because the quest for those answers would be painful.⁴ Hodgins seems to share Kroetsch's view that Canadian writers must learn to "accept the terrors and the obligations and the necessary violence of that questing" ("The Exploding Porcupine" 63).

Hodgins dutifully confronts the unknown, then, writing The Invention of the World and The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne, but apparently comes to a conclusion he had not foreseen: that there are places a writer is not meant to venture. What he seems to discover, exploring possibilities outside the realm of ordinary human experience, is that while we might realize our heroic potential if we were to venture outside the "safe" world of the ordinary, we might also be transformed into something monstrous.⁵ His characters Keneally, Fat Annie, Birdie and Carrie Payne represent this possibility, that there is a point beyond which we cannot safely go, without ceasing to be human. Portraying these characters, Hodgins seems to have reconsidered the postmodern argument that we should overcome the sense of horror that makes us avoid certain experiences.⁶ He seems to have decided that horror may in fact be a healthy response, a gauge to our humanity.

We can speculate that after Hodgins came to this conclusion, realism presented itself to him differently, not as a form that insisted upon the banality of human

experience, but as one concerned with the range of experience we find endurable. Surveying Hodgins' work, we can determine why he first rejects realism, but then must reassess it, discovering that he can, after all, adapt it to his vision.

Central to that vision is his belief that truth is all possibilities, none excluded.⁷ But this is not the truth that linguistic and literary structures correspond to. The truth they reflect is singular: by nature, they eliminate possibilities, assuming only one can be true, the others false.⁸ Hodgins' works make assertions language and literary form understand to be impossible, positing what is contradictory and illogical. For example, Hodgins wants to say that Larry Bowman is both an antihero with diarrhoea, and a heroic saviour. As Bowman himself discovers, failing to find a character whose experience is like his, no literary form exists that could embody a man such as he--romance depicts his heroic aspirations, and realism his antiheroic qualities, but what form can portray both? (117, 139). Keneally embodies contradictions even more extreme than Bowman's: he is at once a mere mortal, whose powers are a hoax, and a god with supernatural abilities. What Hodgins asserts about Joseph Bourne is still more illogical: Bourne is dead, yet he is living. But Hodgins challenges language and literary form most when he insists, in his short story "Three Women of the Country," that Mrs. Starbuck is not a monster, that her abusing her child attests not to evil, but to that part of God which is in all of us.

These are outrageous statements that not only realism,

but no other literary form either, could make without contradicting itself. Hodgins apparently realized that by amalgamating literary forms which assert the opposite, he could create a paradox that would resolve these contradictions. There are three such amalgamations that allow Hodgins to say that nothing is impossible: the amalgamation of realism and myth, of realism and fantasy, and of realism and comedy.

That many Canadian writers before Hodgins had already combined myth and realism does not detract from his achievement. His experiments with this combination are much more sophisticated than any of his predecessors, and their earlier accomplishments only serve to show us how much more Hodgins was able to achieve. Their accomplishment was a mere annexation of myth to realism; Hodgins actually amalgamates the two. O'Hagan's novel Tay John is an obvious example of this annexation: the work divides itself into two unintegrated units, Part I, a mythic vision, and Part II, realism. A comparison of Tay John with Hodgins' The Invention of the World will demonstrate that Hodgins arrives at the truth O'Hagan wants to convey, but fails to find a form for.

Both O'Hagan and Hodgins have conceived of a fascinating paradox, a creature who is at once supernatural and godlike, yet mortal and driven by human needs and weaknesses. O'Hagan's novel is an experiment in progress, a testing of various forms to find the one that defines such a hero.

O'Hagan never discovers such a form. His approach is wrong: no matter how many forms he might have tried, he would not have found one to embody his hero because Tay John is a paradox, and no literary form is dialogic enough to accommodate paradox. Hodgins, recognizing the problem, performs a different experiment. If literary form cannot make contradictory assertions, then what is needed is an integration of forms, such as tragicomedy, which voices paradoxical truths without difficulty.

Myth is too homogeneous to address the paradox of Tay John. It cannot acknowledge that he is at once an ordinary mortal, yet a god, because myth does not recognize mundanity. It understands nothing about ordinary human existence, and can therefore see Tay John only as a god. Tay John is heralded as innovative, but it treats myth in an entirely conventional manner. O'Hagan does not experiment with the principles of myth to allow a new kind of hero to emerge. O'Hagan's myth behaves as does any traditional myth, dissociating itself from the vulgarity and the insignificance of the commonplace. For Tay John to be born, myth necessitates that Yannie, a mortal woman, must die: her death is the concession we find in myth of the mundane and the natural to the divine and the extraordinary. As a mere mortal, she must be excluded from the myth which disclaims Tay John's human parentage. He is a god, independent of human procreation, delivered not from a mortal womb, but out of the earth, miraculously.

In Hodgins' account of the birth of Keneally, we find

myth making the same refusal to acknowledge the mundane. A supernatural messenger prophesies the birth of a god; the child, no ordinary mortal, is conceived in a manner highly unnatural; and the mortal mother dies in childbirth, the human excluded by the superhuman.

But at the same time that Hodgins' myth seeks to eliminate the mundane, it includes it, paradoxically. It is by using two distinct languages that Hodgins' work accommodates paradox. One of those languages describes the conception and birth of Keneally as something that has transcended the everyday. This is the conventional voice of myth: "the ghost of Cathleen ni Houlihan appeared in a dream to predict that her child would be fathered by a bull-god from the sky" (69). But a second voice, coarse and colloquial, insists on a very mundane reality. The mystic experience of Keneally's mother turns into a slapstick routine that focusses on what myth ignores completely, that existence is mundane because of our human limitations: the girl is so startled by the prophecy that she becomes tangled in her blankets, and falls out of bed. Hodgins has conveyed, then, what O'Hagan was not able to: that this heroic child belongs as much to the world of ordinary human existence, as he does to the world of the gods.

A storm of epic proportions attends the miraculous birth of Keneally: the earth shakes, and the sky is unnaturally dark and tempestuous. But while these conventions of myth raise the episode to a plane higher than the everyday, other

elements anchor it at the level of the banal. Grania embodies these two impulses in the text: she is both the supernatural hero, and the clown who represents human limitations. On the one hand, she transcends the human during her mystic experience, contesting with cosmic forces to ascend the mountain and become the guardian of a god. On the other hand, she is all that is weak and demeaning in a human being. Hodgins gives her the traditional role of the burlesque clown, who symbolizes what a ridiculous thing man is. Grania takes a pratfall on her way up the mountain, not as if overcome by cosmic forces, but as if "a rug pulled out from under her" (73). At her most heroic moment, she loses control of her bladder.

A parallel between the epic battle scenes in Tay John and The Invention of the World also demonstrates this point, that Hodgins has given to myth an extra dimension that allows it to embody a paradox it could not accommodate otherwise. O'Hagan is unable in his battle scene to present Tay John as being, in part, an ordinary human being. O'Hagan seems conscious that he is being thwarted in his aim; Jack Denham's perplexity at finding a river separating his human world from the mythical world of Tay John is O'Hagan's own perplexity as a writer unable to integrate the separate realities of myth and realism.⁹ Denham heralds Tay John across the river, desperate for communion, but the yellow-haired god disdainfully ignores him, myth refusing to address the ordinary.

The epic battle between Keneally and the bailiff takes

place in strange territory belonging to both myth and realism. It is a paradoxical vision Hodgins achieves. The qualities of myth are there: this is the world inhabited by the superhuman: Finn McCool, Cuchulain, Brian Boru, Cathleen ni Houlihan. But myth cannot be concerned with time or space, its proper dimension being eternity, yet Keneally, described as one of these superhumans, lives at a very specific point in history, the time of Parnell and the Land League, and references to place are just as specific: Galway, Kealkill, Carrigdhoun, Toronto, an apple orchard in Nova Scotia. Equally paradoxical is the explanation of the battle. On the one hand, the battle is accounted for as an ordinary brawl between two decidedly mortal men. On the other hand, it is explained as a meeting of supernatural forces. First we are told it was a mighty battle, remembered as "two clashing armies that fought to the death for a year and a half...." (87-8). But, we are cautioned, "the truth of it was simpler." We read on, expecting the myth to be exploded, substituted by a mundane explanation. Instead, we are given an account of marvels: Keneally pulls the bailiff's arm off, and the howls of the dying man wake "every sleeping person on the mountain." As the bailiff flees, a strange thing happens: his blood scorches the grass and melts stones which cool and harden to form a red trail that would be used by generations of furze cutters to come. But again a voice intrudes to insist on a mundane reality. "There was nothing more than that to the battle," the narrator announces, "for

all the boasting that's been done about it, and brave Keneally took his countrymen's advice and hid for three days in Con O'Sullivan's house...." (88). We are left with the paradox, then, of an event wondrous yet unextraordinary.

Critics have not understood the truth Hodgins is claiming and are therefore baffled by his treatment of myth. They do not recognize the paradox he has formulated by superimposing realism on myth, and mistake it for a gratuitous contradiction, a game. Hodgins, they feel, starts by treating myth seriously, professing to believe in its truth, but then, or so it seems to them, he undercuts this belief when his treatment of myth becomes comic.¹⁰ David L. Jeffrey has explained the mistake they are making this way: to them, Hodgins is "a jester-trickster deconstructing myth in a satiric and calculated deflation of romantic aspiration and cliché" (Jack Hodgins and His Work 19).¹¹ To them, the comic element in "The Eden Swindle" and "Second Growth" of The Invention of the World and in The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne is parody, a ridiculing of myth. From this, they conclude that Hodgins' work is undermining its own form and meaning, challenging its own assumptions. Unfortunately, Hodgins' own expression for the device he is using contributes to this misinterpretation. He has said that he is using "mock myth," and his term suggests that he does not believe in the marvels and miracles he is depicting (Interview with Hancock 63). Presumably, this is not the case: Hodgins gives a more aptly phrased explanation of his attitude toward the form he is using when he tells Hancock, "The forms of my stories have to

grow out of the subject matter" (48). Choosing the verb "to grow", he suggests that he is not engaged in deconstructing traditional forms, but in creating new ones. Jeffrey observes that a constructive rather than a deconstructive impulse informs Hodgins' writing. "Hodgins' basic instinct," Jeffrey argues, "is charity, a kindly disposition toward a fragmented world which can make of each act of composition an act of love, a 'putting back together....'" (Jack Hodgins and His Work 52).

In both Tay John and The Invention of the World, there is a shift in form as myth gives way to realism. Myth finally cannot accommodate Tay John and his predecessor, Red Rorty. Their behaviour is human, not godlike, and myth must eventually eliminate them: Red Rorty is killed, and Tay John is expelled, not just from the village, but from myth itself.

Keneally too is expelled, but his is not an expulsion from the world of gods into the world of men. He is not being punished for an unforgivable mundanity, by being shorn of a god's status and sent among the banal. On the contrary, he takes his powers with him to the new world, which is not a lower world void of marvels and mystery, but a world as extraordinary as mythic Ireland.

O'Hagan transfers his hero out of myth into realism, then because Tay John proved too human for myth. Keneally's expulsion also coincides with a shift in the novel from myth to realism, but for different reasons. For Hodgins, realism emphasizes even more than myth the paradoxical nature of

Keneally. Of course, Hodgins must modify realism to claim this paradox, and again, a comparison between O'Hagan's treatment of form and Hodgins' is revealing.

If O'Hagan is unable to make myth accommodate Tay John, his use of realism proves even more inadequate. The image of Tay John is distorted by realism. We would expect him to appear in Part II as would any central character in realistic fiction, much like ourselves, the picture of ordinary human qualities. But he is dehumanized, a kind of grotesque, with his missing hand, and misfitting cowboy outfit, and his unnatural stance that makes him seem to have just emerged from the earth. If Tay John appeared ludicrous in the first part of the work, because myth could not accommodate his human weaknesses, he fares no better portrayed as a character in a realistic work: in the petty, banal context of realism, his godlike qualities are a comic hyperbole. Tay John simply cannot be integrated into this mundane world; he stays at its periphery. His tent is far across the lake from the camp of ordinary men, water still the symbol of the distance between myth and the mundane. Eventually he moves even further away from the centre of this world, always approaching the fringe, when he goes to live with Ardith in the wilderness, rejected again. When he vanishes into the earth at the end of the novel, this is his second expulsion from literary form. O'Hagan finally cannot articulate his vision and consigns Tay John to a limbo somewhere between artistic conception and the execution of that conception. Tay John vanishes before the eyes of the trader, before the eyes of the reader. First

myth, and then realism, fail to tell his story, and he ventures into a third realm where O'Hagan himself cannot venture: the realm of silence.

Keneally materializes where Tay John vanishes because Hodgins has compensated for the limitations of realism. Hodgins anticipates the tendency of realism to ridicule the supernatural, and addresses the problem by giving realism a nasty, narrow-minded voice the reader immediately distrusts, the voice of those who tell Becker that Keneally was just an ordinary man, ignoble and base and vile, but certainly not powerful and mysterious. Coleman Steele, a racial bigot who would impose his values on everyone else, tells us that "old Whozzit Keneally" had a "red face and big ears like jug handles" (174-5). Richard Ryburn, who sees himself as too educated to believe stories of the supernatural, calls Keneally a "trouble-making kid" and the legends about him "hogwash" and "baloney." He says legends exist because they are wish-fulfilling: people need to believe in devils because they need excitement and significance in their otherwise dull and meaningless lives. Henry Burke tries to dispel the myth of Keneally with a brutally deflating picture of the colony leader's third wife "with her skirt hoisted up around her waist taking a crap out behind a tree. Too bloody lazy to walk back to the house. And wiped herself with leaves" (178). None of these speakers are reliable; their obvious prejudices make them discreditable, and their fierce denial of Keneally's power betrays fear, and a desperate need to

disprove what they know is true.

Other more reliable voices give us a different picture of Keneally. Certainly he has all the weaknesses and shortcomings of an ordinary human being, they assent, but they also insist that his powers are uncanny and unnatural. They present him as a paradox. Dairmud Evans describes him as a "desperate whining man" but also as a bull-like creature superhumanly strong, who in an unnatural rage, cleans out the bar with his shoulder (203). Keneally's wife, Lily, insists on the same paradox. On the one hand Keneally was painfully human, aging and succumbing to all the indignities of old age: "He was an old man. The big red peasant face and the huge hands looked all wrong, suddenly, on that thin trembling body. There were thick tufts of hair greying on his ears, and hairs growing on his nose he sometimes forgot to clip" (268). In his deterioration, he represents the most disgustingly human vulnerabilities, his hands become filthy, and covered in running sores. But he is also, she tells us, undeniably supernatural, with a mysterious power, definitely magic, that he holds over the community. "He could rise to the heavens...there wasn't anything he couldn't do" (265-6).

Hodgins realizes, apparently, that realism does not lend itself to the depiction of such a strange, paradoxical vision. His characters suggest other literary forms that would correspond more closely--legend and fairy tale--but Hodgins opts nevertheless to employ realism, because, when modified, it expresses better than fairy tale the bizarre reality of Keneally. Morris Hall realizes that his first statement--

that his brother's strange involvement with Keneally's wife was like episodes in a fairy tale--needs qualifying. "It wasn't exactly like a fairy tale," he retracts, ". . . because the first thing he finds out is that she's married and not married to just anybody but to what's his name, the leader of the whole works, Keneally . . . The second thing that wasn't a fairy-tale story was that she was older, I bet she was twice as old as he was, beautiful or not she could've been his mother, and here she was fooling around with a kid that's never been in love before" (186).

It would seem that Hodgins realizes only a combination of forms can encompass the whole truth of Keneally. Realism can portray much, but not all of this truth, and so Hodgins subtly combines realism with the tall tale and the fairy tale. He accomplishes this by employing the same device he used in "The Eden Swindle": two languages asserting opposite truths. In "Second Growth" we first encounter the voice of fairy tale, in Becker's preface. It gives way, however, to the voice of realism describing Maggie on her way to church, a voice that insists on detailing the prosaic: Maggie is wearing "the same pink dress she wore to her son's wedding, but cut off at the knee." The eye of realism observes "rows of ugly new houses in the subdivisions that were growing up on the rest of the colony land, the stain of splashed-up mud from their unfinished yards still visible like a high-water mark on the white stucco walls. . . ." (342). Gradually, however, a second voice begins to be heard, the voice of tall

tale. While the voice of realism describes the banality of the urban landscape Maggie is travelling through, this other voice describes the bizarre conduct of the taxi driver taking her to the church. This second voice also observes certain peculiarities at the ceremony: the groom's mother, unable to seat herself in the front pew, has wedged her wheelchair right up against her son's legs.

But before this voice can become too prominent, the voice of realism reasserts itself, to describe the banal wedding gifts from Woolworths', left on the back seats of the cars of the wedding guests. Before the description is finished, tall tale intrudes again. Cora Manson faints into the aisle, revives, and stumbles away, "her plastic pig flapping against her chest." From here, the pitch of the voice rises out of control, almost screaming as it tells of extravagant impossibilities: that the guests include the premier of British Columbia, and the Prime Minister of Canada; that an entire herd of hogs is consumed at the dinner; that the cost-of-living figures for the west coast are thrown out of kilter for a month because of the colossal wedding banquet; that a guest dies at the reception from overeating. The voice reaches a crescendo when it recounts an epic battle that takes place in the reception hall.

Hodgins, then, has found a way, through the incorporation of fairy tale and tall tale, to render realism more elastic. His realism expands to include the bizarre and the mysterious, where O'Hagan's could only register the strain Tay John as a supernatural being put on a realistic

form. We observed that the image of Tay John was comically distorted by realism: Keneally, unlike his counterpart, does not become a comic hyperbole. Lily, describing the outlandish costume he wears, says "you'd expect him to look a fool in it, a big peasant like him, but he didn't. . . ." (258).

Just as Hodgins' amalgamation of myth and realism has been misunderstood by some critics, so too has his amalgamation of fantasy and realism. The two cannot be merged into a single vision, they argue; fantasy is concerned with things imaginary, realism with things actual, and no writer can create a world that includes both. Hodgins, they feel, must therefore be unsure of his intentions; he has not decided whether he wants to fabulate imaginary worlds, or document the actual one. The result of merging fantasy and realism is illogical, they argue. George Woodcock, for example, sees Keneally as a being that belongs to neither the world of fantasy nor the actual world; he cannot belong to fantasy because he is based on historical facts, but because Hodgins has attributed magical and demonic powers to him, he has no place in documentary fiction either:

It is when Hodgins turns Keneally into a semi-supernatural being of malign and magical powers that the novel weakens. For what he is doing is to juxtapose true myth with fabricated myth. The strange life of the Vancouver Island community is one of those natural gifts to the novelist--truth grown stranger

than fiction that in memory it is already myth; even before it is set down on paper. To add further convolutions is to transfer it into the world of fictional invention, and to lose it as mythic truth. The founders of the West Coast religious communities were strange enough in their own human right. There was no need to make them demonic ("Novels From Near and Far" 90).

What the critics fail to perceive is that things they consider imaginary, Hodgins considers to be real. Magical and demonic powers are not "fictional inventions" to him, but realities. Because he understands all things to be possible, Hodgins believes in a reality much stranger than most of us would allow. He explains that he never writes about things which are imaginary. "What I write is to me 'realistic'," he told Hancock, "though not everyone thinks I'm describing 'reality.' I'm often considered weird or almost surrealistic though I never write about anything that I don't want people to believe quite literally" (48).¹² Outside of biblical literature (the Book of Jonah, for example), there is no literary form to correspond to Hodgins' unusual notion of reality.¹³ Realism expresses much of what Hodgins wants to say, but it does not acknowledge that the supernatural exists. Fantasy does, and so by amalgamating the two, Hodgins achieves the scope he needs to define reality as he sees it.

But it is important to recognize that although Hodgins

finds in fantasy the scope he needs for his vision, he does not substitute fantasy for realism, but amalgamates the two. We have seen that Hodgins is dismayed that readers regard him as a fantasy writer; when we consider the ethics he feels writers should adhere to, we can understand why although Hodgins finds certain aspects of fantasy appropriate, he would never use fantasy without imposing on it certain restrictions.

Fantasy celebrates the impossible: it prefers the imaginary to the real, and concerns itself with exploring the antithesis of reality. We can see, then, why Hodgins' work cannot be fantasy. Hodgins has argued that literature must address reality.¹⁴ For him, pure fantasy is a dangerous kind of escapism because it offers people invented worlds as an alternative to the unhappy world they find themselves in, instead of helping them to accept and adapt to reality. We are reminded of all his characters who invite unhappy people to live in the paradises they have invented: Maggie, Keneally, Weins, Mr. Pernouski. People accept their invitation, only to discover you cannot live in an invented world--it is just an illusion, and collapses in upon itself. Instead of inventing worlds, the artist should make the world that already exists more habitable to us. He can do this, Hodgins explains, by rendering that world comprehensible. We do not understand our world because it is hieroglyphic, and we cannot read the symbols. It is the artist who can interpret them for us, and his work then, translates our

world for us.¹⁵

We can detect clearly in Hodgins' work a refusal to provide us with an alternate world to our own. Hodgins understands very well the desires we bring to escapist literature, and while he sympathizes that we are not happy in our world, he believes it would be wrong to gratify those desires, and so he consciously thwarts them. For example, in fantasy literature we encounter the supernaturally beautiful: it answers our need for perfection, and the power we think accompanies that perfection. Raime has this supernatural beauty, but Hodgins, in The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne, refuses to gratify us with a voyeuristic indulgence. Like the disappointed fantasy reader, Larry Bowman does not understand why Raime fails to fulfill his expectations. He does not realize that she must refuse him because his fantasy love for her would never be more than an illusion; he must learn to live happily in the real world, loving a real woman, Angela.

We also take to fantasy literature our desire for omnipotence, and what it would allow: the complete gratification of material wants. Bourne, Fat Annie, and Keneally seem to promise to fulfill our need--they appear to be patterned after the immortal, power-wielding character in fantasy who employs his power to dominate others, and to acquire whatever he--and the reader--wants. But Hodgins' characters are not escapist creations, and they therefore are not allowed to indulge this fantasy of exercising unlimited power to get everything they want. Hodgins insists that

Bourne, Fat Annie, and Keneally live in the same world we do. They are therefore subject to the same limitations as we are and cannot gratify their every selfish desire any more than we can. Hodgins' notion of reality allows Bourne strength and immortality, but these powers can be used only for completely unselfish reasons quite uninteresting to the fantasy reader. Fat Annie is even more of a disappointment to the fantasy reader because her freedom is taken away completely: thwarted, unable to exercise her powers, she retreats into her hotel room forever. Keneally comes closest to fulfilling the expectations of a fantasy reader--his desires are boundless, and utterly selfish--but Hodgins' sense of reality dictates that his powers be defective, so he fails to achieve what he wants.

Like his amalgamation of fantasy and realism, Hodgins' amalgamation of comedy and realism challenges our assumptions about reality by insisting that nothing is impossible, putting the actual and the fabulous on the same plane. Comedy would seem to be a form Hodgins would find inappropriate, given his insistence that fiction be referential to actuality. Comedy, like fantasy, is antithetical to realism because it divorces itself from actuality and addresses instead the fabulous and the imaginary. We understand comedy to depict a world other than our own. The comic world is strange and unnatural. Comic characters are not humans, rendered realistically, but caricatures and grotesques. If their appearance is nothing

like ours, neither are their experiences: their problems are outrageously far-fetched, and the solutions--there is, unrealistically, always a solution in comedy--even more incredible. The world of comedy functions nothing like our own: there are no causal relations between things, and consequences are either nonexistent or illogical. All is unpredictable, and the reader finds himself responding very differently to the comic world than he would to his own. He is detached from what would normally concern him, and amused by what would usually outrage, horrify, or sadden him.

To understand how comedy could present itself to Hodgins, then, as a viable form, we have to remind ourselves that the world as Hodgins sees it is bizarre and outrageous. Therefore, there is no conflict between Hodgins' vision of reality, and the vision of comedy--actually, the two correspond quite closely. Comic conventions perceived by most of us as highly unrealistic are, to Hodgins, reflective of our daily experience. Burlesque, for example, is usually employed by an author to distance the reader from reality, but Hodgins uses it to document behaviour that he insists is typical enough of people living on the West Coast.¹⁶ His methods of character portrayal seem unrealistic--depicting Mad Mother Thomas, for example, he seems to create a caricature rather than a human representation. But Mad Mother Thomas, he tells us, is inspired by a woman who actually exists, and his intention is to represent her as accurately as possible.¹⁷ We assume that when an author wants to portray an actual person, he will use realism, but

Hodgins finds that comedy mirrors the reality of this woman best. Hodgins challenges the modern writer's notion that comedy distorts reality, while realism documents it accurately. Comic endings represent for the modern writer one of the most serious distortions of reality, but for Hodgins comic endings are far more realistic than the antiheroic failures that characterize the endings of modern works. Hodgins feels that the harmony and fulfillment achieved at the close of comedy are possible realities, and would be actualities, if we did not convince ourselves, he says, of our notion of "man as victim," a notion he refutes in his interview with Hancock:

I look around and I don't see all that many tortured victims. I see a lot of people who are making decent lives for themselves despite their problems. I'm as interested in people whose dreams come true. Even though that's very unfashionable. It's much easier to write a convincing story with a horrible defeated ending. I think that says a lot about the world we're living in. People will automatically and unquestionably accept a story that ends with people being defeated and smashed and bleeding and committing suicide. That's real life they say; that's realistic fiction. Yet they'll raise an eyebrow and challenge a story which has a person triumph.

Perhaps this is why I admire the courage of John Fowles. Do you remember Daniel Martin's search for a

true ending to the novel he was writing? "To hell with cultural fashion," he declared, "To hell with the imagined which does not say the truth." And the truth, for him too, included hope and good fortune (56).

If it is Hodgins' opinion, then, that comedy depicts what the world is really like, while realism distorts it, why has he amalgamated comedy and realism? If we examine comedy further, we discover that it fails to correspond to Hodgins' notion of reality in one crucial respect, and this failure, we will see, can be compensated for by realism. Comedy does not acknowledge what for Hodgins is a truth that governs our lives: we are responsible for our actions. We misperceive reality, Hodgins says, if we do not realize that our greatest moral obligation is to discover what our responsibilities are, and to fulfill them. The crisis points in his fiction are moments of revelation when his characters finally see that others need them. Told by Horseman to take responsibility for his true self, Wade levels his fort, abandons his shiftless lifestyle, and marries Maggie. Thinking at first that she will retreat from life by hiding in her old house at Hed, Maggie realizes that she must go back to the colony to those who need her, taking with her Mad Mother Thomas, for whom she must also now be responsible. As Joseph Bourne approaches death, he shirks responsibility more and more, resenting the weakness of others as an imposition on him. Resurrected, he again has the supernatural energy to

protect and nurture everyone. He also inspires others to take responsibility for those weaker than themselves: Larry decides to marry Angela and care for her fatherless baby, and Jenny realizes that it is her responsibility to stay sane, after the mudslide kills Slim, and her grief and horror almost overwhelm her, so that Slim's undesirable children will have a home.

Modern comedy typically rejects the notion that we are responsible for our actions. It posits a nonsense world where there is no relation between act and consequence. Comic characters are therefore liberated from responsibility for their actions because nothing they do will cause visible pain, injury, guilt, shame, or punishment. Since none of their acts have consequences, nothing they do can be said to result in either good or evil. All action is amoral, then, and even when such comedy explores atrocity, therefore, it does not express horror or disgust or outrage.

Hodgins' work can be seen as a response to the controversy that has arisen because of the black humour present in so much work by postmodern writers. There is an unresolved debate about the ethics of the amoral perspective black humour allows them to take on atrocity.¹⁸ One side argues that comedy liberates us from our conscience, and our sense of justice, and our sense of pity, when it blocks our natural humane responses of indignation and horror. We forfeit our humanity, this argument contends, when we take a comic view of atrocity. This is Hodgins' concern with comic

form: that it could come to be a celebration instead of a denunciation of amorality. This is how Barclay Desmond sees comedy in Hodgins' curious short story "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Famous Barclay Sisters." He feels that his strong sense of conscience has caused him to lead a boring, banal life, and he decides to use comedy to liberate himself from the feelings of guilt, justice and pity that restrict him. Like his aunts, famous practical jokers, he claims the immunity of the joker from moral culpability--the joker cannot be held responsible for anything he does. Heady with his sense of liberation, Barclay cruelly degrades and horrifies others, believing in the comic principle that since causality does not exist, nobody can be hurt by his actions, least of all himself. But reality believes in causality even if comedy does not, and Barclay's jokes have very painful results that he cannot detach himself from after all. He is stricken with guilt and remorse when he realizes the harm he has done to others. This short story is not a puritanical denunciation of comedy, but a warning against its misuse. Hodgins is arguing that comedy must appeal to the reader's sense of morality: if it allows the reader to take an amoral view of existence, callous and conscience-free, then comedy becomes sinister.

It would seem that Hodgins does not accept the argument postmodern writers present, defending themselves against charges that their use of black humour is morally irresponsible. Their intention, they explain, in viewing atrocity comically, is to startle the reader out of

complacency into a more genuine moral response. They argue that allowing the reader to sympathize with suffering assuages his concern. Smug in the belief that his pity is the correct moral response, he becomes complacent, and then comfortable, and then dismisses the problem. Comedy, making him react in an unexpected way, makes him more acutely aware of his morals than he would be had the work demanded a conventional response.

This is not the principle at work in Hodgins' novels and short stories. In his fiction, the assumption is that the reader's conscience is lulled to sleep by the amoral perspective of comedy, and so a strategy is used to reawaken the reader's moral sense. As the reader becomes detached, thinking he is liberated from moral response by the comic vision in Hodgins' work, he is suddenly asked to change his attitude from amoral indifference to an extremely uncomfortable concern.

We can observe this strategy in Hodgins' depiction of the death of Fat Annie. The episode begins as a typically comic situation that the reader observes with customary detachment. The episode seems to be outside any frame of reference the reader could have which would lead him to a sympathetic response so inappropriate to comedy. Fat Annie is too bizarre, and Jacob Weins too much a clown, for the reader to identify with either one. Even as the fatal accident occurs, the reader continues to be detached and amused, because the event conforms to the familiar pattern of

slapstick routine. A clown--Weins--attempting the impossible--to turn back time and give the town the original Fat Annie--meets his comic downfall. The accident has all the characteristics of standard slapstick, the action taking place at a crazy speed, Weins' movements wildly out of control. He careens down the stairs, Annie's chair speeds madly through the air, and she "rockets" through the door when her chair lands upright, abruptly, in the lobby. The unnatural sight of a rocking chair unexpectedly turned into a missile contributes to the comic effect. In this nonsense world, the wildly impossible seems feasible: it appears "as if, for a moment, [the rocking chair] intended to take off through the first open window it could find and ascend to the rainy sky" (238).

But the episode does not end like a slapstick routine. We expect Fat Annie to land intact: complications in comedy resolve themselves without harmful consequences. But this accident ends in the most serious consequence of all--death. Fat Annie, who should have been immortal, immune to death, has been killed. The clown, who in comedy never has to pay for his mistakes, is here accused of murder, and the intense horror he experiences belongs to the suffering that realization brings in a tragedy, not a comedy. As Weins contemplates the body of Fat Annie, a "terrible cold doubt" fills him (239). Barclay, in "Ladies and Gentlemen, The Famous Barclay Sisters" is in a similar state of mind when he realizes his antics are going to have serious consequences he was sure he was liberated from. Nauseous with fear he

wonders if he has made a mistake in judgement. The reader is feeling very uncomfortable too, because he also has made a mistake in judgement: failing to appreciate Hodgins' moral concern, he has irresponsibly detached himself from his conscience.

It is by amalgamating realism with comedy that Hodgins is able to make his reader challenge the amoral assumptions of comedy he would normally take for granted. He introduces the voice of realism gradually and imperceptibly so that the principles of comedy collapse quite suddenly, and those of realism begin to operate just as unexpectedly, giving the reader no warning that the rules have changed. Disoriented, the reader is startled into a moral awareness. Examining the account of Mr. Manku's swimming demonstration, we can see how the reader's moral sense is reawakened. The episode initially conforms to a traditional comic pattern, but then deviates to introduce dark consequences. At first, we do not perceive the situation as a human drama in which there is anguish and suffering, but as a comedy, in which failure is not painful. It is impossible to see Mr. Manku as suffering heroically, his act being so trite, and we dissociate ourselves from him because of the ridiculous figure he cuts with his hyperbolic efforts:

He took off his shirt and handed it to Papa Magnani, like a great actor getting ready for a performance--a great actor used to servants. Soon he was stark naked--all his clothes folded over Papa Magnani's

arm--and rubbed his huge belly proudly. There was a strange mysterious smile on his face the whole time he was stepping into his trunks and pulling them up--Papa Magnani had never seen such dignity in all his life--and an even deeper, more mysterious smile when he pulled that rubber swim-cap over his head and snapped it under his chin (130).

We are even more detached because we cannot relate to the characters as human beings; neither Manku nor any of the other characters in the episode are depicted realistically, but have been stylized to appear as caricatures, even grotesques: Manku is a "huge belly" and "large buttocks" and the Chamber-Pott children are "yard-apes" (130, 129).

Even when violence and conflict are introduced, we are unconcerned because the fight that breaks out between Manku's sons and the Chamber-Pott children is presented comically, as a fisticuff in a burlesque. With their gestures all absurdly exaggerated, and their actions undignified and unnatural, they are clowns rather than human beings:

Mr. Manku saw his wife, wailing and tearing her hair, in the centre of a jabbering cluster of daughters-in-law and children outside the fence. He saw Joginder holding on to one of those small children that played around the pool, beating him on the head and body with his free hand. He saw Ravinder engaged in a shouting

match with one of the instructors, waving his arms and making wild threats. He saw Papa Magnani running this way, shaking his head, wringing his hands (132).

But the principles of comedy suddenly collapse, and those of realism intrude. Causality, nonexistent in the comic world, is suddenly operative. "You have been the cause of violence," Rajinder rebukes his father. Humiliation, disappointment and mortification, never painful consequences to be taken seriously in comedy, are the bitter outcome of Manku's attempt to swim. While the clown would conventionally go on to his next experience, untouched by his failure, Manku is devastated.

In The Invention of the World Hodgins' technique is slightly different. He presents parallel scenes, the first typically amoral, the second with a moral point of view unlooked for by the reader who expects the second scene to operate according to the same comic principles as the first. Hodgins first presents us with the violent exchange between Danny Holland and the Zulu. The violence is a source of humour because it is too hyperbolic and bizarre to take seriously. Holland and his lover are caricatures rather than human beings, and they complete their dehumanization when they take to their vehicles to finish the fight. It is machines, not humans, that we watch. Nor can the reader identify with their irrational conduct: they scream out their love for each other even as they threaten to cut each other's throats. The conflict, although fierce, is also comic

because it has no consequences. There are no injuries, physical or emotional, in spite of flying glass and savage insults. Even when the combattants meet in a head-on collision which brings the police, nobody is hurt.

In a parallel scene, it is Maggie who drives her van head-on into Holland's truck. Again, a violent scene is depicted as comic. Hodgins accelerates the pace of events ludicrously so that Maggie loses her dignity in a humorous scramble to keep ahead of disaster. As she loses control of the situation, she becomes more and more comic: her hyperbolic reactions are ludicrous, as is her solution to the crisis, to simply bulldoze Holland's truck out of the way. Adding to this comic effect is the incongruity between her appearance--she is attired in a pink floor-length evening gown--and her conduct--she is swearing, throwing punches, handling her van as if it were a logging truck.

But the outcome of this scene is not the same as that of Holland's confrontation with the Zulu. A comic figure, Holland is baffled when the laws of comedy are not adhered to, and Maggie treats their conflict with deadly seriousness, not as a game. "What the hell," he hollered. . . Holland's face, in the cracked windshield opposite her, glared back, unbelieving. This was not what he'd intended" (60). This is fighting in earnest, and there will be serious injuries. Unlike the amused townsfolk who gathered to be entertained by the brawl between Holland and the Zulu, Wade, Anna, and Becker watch in horror as Maggie nearly kills herself, almost going over the cliff before she gives in and stops her van.

Like Holland, both the bystanders and the reader are puzzled, unable to comprehend what is happening. If this is comedy, then why is the situation so frightening? Why is Maggie so shattered, and why are we horrified, instead of amused, by her outrageous behaviour?

When Holland and the Zulu are finished fighting, they have no consequences to face. Maggie, however, stands in the street and sweeps up the broken glass they have left behind them, our first indication in The Invention of the World that Hodgins will insist on consequences and responsibility in a comic world. After her own battle, she must assume heavier responsibilities, and make many painful admissions. Perhaps the most painful is that she has allowed Holland to make her forget her principles.

Hodgins' reader is uncomfortably aware that he too has been made to forget his principles, and now is being faulted for it. It is comedy that has made him forget himself: it has asked him to overcome strong inhibitions to laugh at what should not be laughed at. Hodgins persuades the reader to overcome these inhibitions, only to rebuke him once he gives in and laughs. Hodgins seems to be doing this to teach the reader the same lesson learnt by Barclay Desmond--that we must not use comedy to liberate ourselves from a painful but responsible identification with others who are suffering.

To summarize, then, we have seen that by amalgamating realism with myth, fantasy, and comedy, Hodgins insists that our world is stranger than we suppose. We have seen that

some of his critics objected to this: what they are refusing to accept are the assertions made by grotesque art. The principle of the grotesque art we have already identified in Hodgins' work: the supernatural and the natural, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the abnormal and the normal are all put on the same plane, all lines of distinction between them erased. Perhaps critical objection to the grotesque is so vehement because the grotesque glorifies and celebrates what we find revolting. We are particularly repelled by incongruity, which is the basis of the grotesque vision, and by the distortion of things beautiful into things irregular and imperfect, a transformation the grotesque celebrates.

Hodgins, it would seem, is interested, in his earlier works, in the way the grotesque redefines "disgusting" and "appealing" because he wants to convince us that certain truths which we find repelling, and therefore reject, are actually desirable and must be embraced.¹⁹ We see incongruity as distressing evidence that the universe is chaotic, but in Hodgins' earlier works incongruity is interpreted as evidence that our world is miraculous, that nothing is impossible. This is how we are to read the strange symbols of incongruity left for Port Annie to interpret: a boat full of sea creatures rocking in the boughs of a tree, periwinkles and seaweed in beds and cupboards. But it is not only the incongruous that we misinterpret: in Hodgins' early work it is argued that the monstrous is not sinister, but beautiful, evidence not of the devil, but of

God. We are to see God manifested in the ghastly images, in "Three Women of the Country", of the calf's mutilated head and the face of the dead Mrs. Starbuck.

But it is human nature, we are told in Hodgins' early works, to want to avoid the truths revealed to us by the grotesque. Confronted with incongruity and the grotesque proposal that nothing is impossible, Hodgins' characters refuse to see this. Rather than believe the truth is all possibilities, they try to lock metamorphic truth into a single shape.²⁰ For example, they deny Fat Annie's transformation from whale to woman, and Bourne's resurrection. They try to ignore the significance of the tidal wave, unwilling to acknowledge that the very world they inhabit changes shape. Even the much less dramatic metamorphoses of Maggie, Larry and Jenny they find too threatening to believe in.

They try, without success, to deprive the shape-shifter of his power so that they may impose a closed definition on truth. Raime, the people of Port Annie are determined to lock into a single shape. Because they cannot name her, she represents all possible identities. They think that by capturing her in the interviewing studio, and locking her into an agreement to answer all Bourne's questions, they can determine exactly who she is, and account for her completely. But instead of getting an explanation, the town is confronted with even more mystery when, because of the confrontation they have forced him into, Bourne apparently dies. Even when he

finally emerges from the shack where Raime has been watching over what seems to be his corpse, the question of whether or not Bourne is dead or alive is still not resolved, and never will be according to Port Annie's black and white terms. The truth is, Bourne is both dead and alive, but the town is not prepared to accept both possibilities.

Weins thinks he can settle the debate about whether or not Fat Annie really exists by dragging her, if she really is up there, from the dark room she is said to live in. He ambushes her room, thinking he can forcibly drag the truth into the light, but he loses his grip on Fat Annie, and the truth, as he carries her downstairs. She dies in the fall, and her death prevents him from ascertaining anything. She remains an unidentifiable shape-shifter: nobody can name what he has dragged from the room--a lifeless shape that is not human, something like a turnip.

Maggie, Wade and Becker believe, like Weins and the people of Port Annie, that they can reduce all possible truths to the one correct truth by making the shape-shifter take a single form. They think that by travelling to Ireland they can either prove or disprove conclusively whether or not Keneally was a supernatural being. They are fairly confident before their arrival that the stories about his powers are untrue, and do not expect to find the circle of stones where Keneally was supposed to have been born, or the village where he is said to have grown up. When they discover that both places actually do exist, they think that the question is settled. But the stones and the ruined village assert

opposite truths, that Keneally was both reality and illusion.

The shards of plate, and stone walls, and inscriptions are concrete reality, but the village is also an illusion, as insubstantial as the mist that evaporates even as the travellers look on. Becker can then notice that vegetation has covered the remains of the village. "It's all gone back," he exclaims, observing not the triumph of wilderness over civilization, but the triumph of reality over illusion (308).

Like the village, the circle of stones speaks of two conflicting truths, that Keneally was, indeed, a magical being, and that he was an ordinary mortal man. The cow manure, the muddy cattle trails, and the rock pile "fallen in on itself" place Keneally firmly in the realm of the natural. At first, the site seems to deny anything magical or marvellous. The circle, imperfectly shaped, is smaller than Maggie had expected. A tourist plaque gives a most banal definition of the site: "a national monument," with no "hints, no clues to the magic." But while most of the stones are "ordinary" and "whitish", the tallest is undeniably magical, "burning up sunlight" (314). Maggie feels a power in the stones, despite their unextraordinary appearance.

The pilgrims, Weins, and the people of Port Annie fail to discover the truth even in these head-on encounters because their method is wrong. Their drive to find the one true possibility amongst several false ones misleads them. Truth, Hodgins asserts in his work, is all-inclusive rather

than exclusive, infinite rather than closed. It is all possibilities, even contradictory ones, existing at once. Paradoxically, then, Keneally is a hoax and a reality. Bourne is dead and alive. Maggie is a logger's whore and a virtuous healer.

Hodgins' characters fail to perceive this, even though a persistent force is at work erasing the lines of definition and classification they keep imposing, an indomitable force that manifests itself as a tidal wave, a landslide, and nature overgrowing man's lines of division, his fences, walls and pathways.²¹

What they must learn is that lines drawn to separate and make a distinction are meaningless, and distort the truth. Either/or questions will not take them to the truth. This is reflected in the very syntactical structure of Hodgins' prose. His characters have drawn an either/or line down the centre of the issue as to whether or not Keneally is a hoax. Hodgins bats the truth back and forth across the either/or line his characters have drawn, using the coordinators "but" and "if" to make swift, repeated counterassertions: " [the rockpile] looked pitiful, as if it had been something else once and had been reduced to this. But there was nothing pitiful, or pitying, in the stone circle itself, if four big blocks of rock could be said to form a circle. They were closer together than she'd expected, there was only room between them for muddy cow trails to cross, but they looked as if they'd grown up, four large blunted teeth from beneath the earth. . . ." (emphasis mine)(314)

Just as Hodgins' characters attempt to deny that truth is all possibilities by imposing a single shape on metamorphic reality, they strive to eliminate incongruity from their world by imposing on it a polarized scheme. This way, all things organize themselves along a dividing line between paired opposites: moral and immoral, important and insignificant, exciting metropolis and dull small town, white and blue collar worker, real and counterfeit, odd and normal. It seems an attractive concept to them because everything falls into a simple, clearly defined, fixed scheme. They always feel they know what course to take because this world is perfectly comprehensible: all relations are either comparisons or contrasts, and by simply substituting with its antithesis whatever is problematic, one should have the solution. For Weins, the answer to Port Annie's collapsing tourist trade is obvious: if the town is too wet, you need only bring the desert to it. Wade applies this same way of thinking to his problem: seeing that his hyperactive family is never happy, he assumes that he can find contentment in idleness. Maggie reasons that if her life has been unhappy in the bush, it will necessarily be a good life in town. This is Jenny's logic too: if she is insignificant when she is single, then she will be popular and important when she marries.

Hodgins' characters finally cannot live in the polarized world they construct, and they learn to accept the truth they have tried so hard to avoid. They polarize their world to

such an extent that it splits into two worlds, heaven and hell, and finally collapses when the poles move too far apart. While Mr. Pernouski thinks of himself as the proprietor of paradise, Mrs. Eckhart assures him that he is the proprietor of hell. Both assertions are distortions of the truth, and between the two of them, Mr. Pernouski and Mrs. Eckhart, cause reality to collapse completely, leaving Mr. Pernouski in a dark, absurd void. When Mayor Weins attempts to separate heaven and hell, to turn Port Annie into a paradise, all he succeeds in creating is a nonsense world of displacement, incongruity, and grotesquerie because he has so distorted reality. His ludicrous costumes, the obscene, monstrous figure of Fat Annie--a fraud, and therefore, an absurdity--and, of course, his giant transplanted cactus, symbolize the absurdity he has reduced reality to. Keneally, trying to create a paradise, also constructs a nonsense world that illogically collapses on him, its maker, and sustainer. Because Maggie, like Keneally, has tried to isolate heaven from hell, an act of unnatural separation, she too fails to create a paradise, and offers Lily, Becker, Julius and Anna not a new Eden, but a nonsense world. All of Maggie's efforts to protect and nurture bring about illogical results: Lily dies, absurdly, and Julius' decision to flee his sanctuary to run to the very place he fears most--a nursing home--is irrational.

Those who live in a polarized world become polarized themselves in an unnatural dividing of identity, symbolized by the sinister and bizarre splintering of Keneally and Wade

into twins. They cannot exist as two separate selves. Although he enjoys the mischief and confusion he creates, even Keneally is eventually overwhelmed by it, and he reintegrates himself. Wade leads an unfulfilled, meaningless life until he learns to accept the twin, an aspect of himself he has rejected and literally detached himself from.

This reintegration of self is a rehabilitation possible only to those who accept that because truth is all possibilities, they embody all possible selves. We note that once the characters in Hodgins' early work have accepted all the possible selves they could be, then they go on to realize a better self than they have been. Wade, Maggie, Jenny, Larry and Angela try to invent a new image for themselves, not knowing they have only to acknowledge a heroic self that already exists, but is waiting for them to realize.

Hodgins' characters discover that heroic self when they are mature enough to confront the grotesque. In "Three Women of the Country," for Charlene to mature morally, she must return to Mrs. Starbuck's attic to confront the horror there that she has fled from. Similarly, Lily redeems herself when she finds the inner strength to recall unbearable memories of her life with Keneally. Wade must heroically endure painful encounters with the appalling Horseman, and Bourne must confront death itself.

The assumption made in Hodgins' early works, then, is that confronting the grotesque, we discover our heroic nature. In Hodgins' later works, however, a very different

possibility is considered, one that many postmodern writers find fascinating: if we could learn to overcome our sense of repugnance, which postmodernists believe we do not feel naturally, but are taught, we could get in touch with dark desires we are not even aware we have, and discover our true nature. Postmodernism is intrigued by the possibility that ours is not a "human" nature--that if we could divest ourselves of inhibitions, we could transform ourselves into something very different from our present state as human beings. Hodgins, it would seem, finds this possibility appalling: what we would become, he says in "More Than Conquerors" and "The Plague Children" are monsters. If we contrast what Carrie Payne represents with what we have said Charlene represents in "Three Women of the Country," we can appreciate why Hodgins rejects in his later work postmodern beliefs he was prepared to explore in his early fiction. Like Charlene, Carrie has risked all, and has faced unbearable horrors, but her encounter has not led her to discover heroic qualities she had not realized she possessed. Charlene's confrontation with the obscenity in Starbucks' attic was an act of strength but Carrie has been overwhelmed by weakness. She has not been strong enough to believe without tangible proof, and so she has killed her daughter to force God to give her a sign that He exists. Carl Roote follows Carrie into the funeral parlour, thinking to confront the horror with her, having given in to the same weakness, overwhelmed by his terror of Gladdy's illness. Had he succeeded in joining her, he too might have become a monster,

but he realizes, with Gladdy's help, how perverse and wrong his impulse is. Carl acknowledges that he has been fortunate to have been spared the encounter: "When I saw it wasn't going to happen, I was glad" (158). He understands that man has "no business" exploring these dark places (158). He must stay within the safe realm of normal human experience if he wishes to keep his humanity intact.

We have no business experiencing such encounters, it is insisted in The Barclay Family Theatre because we are giving in to a dangerous weakness, and letting ourselves be drawn into an unhealthy relation with horror, a relation that renders us subhuman. This is the relation the farmers in "The Plague Children" find themselves in. They do not react like the residents of Port Annie when their mundane world is invaded by the bizarre. Once they get over an initial alarm, they find that at a deeper level, they are attracted to the horror that has come into their lives, fascinated by it. Unlike Charlene or Lily, who have to force themselves into a painful confrontation, Macken and Hopper enjoy the encounter, because it allows them to indulge sadistic appetites. Hopper relishes setting his bull free to attack the mushroom pickers. Macken enjoys driving his tractor toward them, and becomes so mesmerized by his pleasure that he cannot stop himself, and crushes a child under his wheels.

We can see why Hodgins abandons the grotesque to return to realism. Exploring the bizarre, we run the risk of losing sight of our humanity. Hodgins parts company with the

postmodernists finally, although early in his career he was interested in claiming the same freedom as theirs. While the postmodernist insists on the freedom to explore all possibilities, Hodgins questions the wisdom of such a claim, and contents himself with exploring only those possibilities which are human.

Notes

- ¹ Ronald Sukenick rejects realism, explaining that:

Realistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization, and, above all, the ultimate, concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. In the world of post-realism, however, all of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic (from The Death of the Novel and Other Stories in "The New Tradition" 35).

Raymond Olderman, convinced that "the facts of contemporary experience are constantly beyond belief," concurs with Sukenick about the inadequacy of realism, arguing that "part of the frightening impact of the recent novel is in the suggestion that its fantastic events may not just be capturing the truths of the human heart; they may be truly rendering the actual texture of human experience" (1, 6). Robert Scholes explains that many contemporary writers have become fabulators because "reality is too subtle for realism to catch it" (Fabulation and Metafiction 13). John Hawkes dismisses realism as "pedestrian thinking" and says he is interested therefore in "the creation of new forms of fiction" (Keuhl 182-3).

² Julia Kristeva has defined postmodernism in these terms, as a defiance of limits to voice what has up until now been unspoken. She says that postmodernism is characterized by "formidable attempts to expand the limits of the signifiable, that is, to expand the boundaries of human experience through the realignment of its most characteristic element, language" (137). "Despite its phobias, writing is nonetheless definitely venturing into the darkest regions where fear, anguish, and a defiance of verbal clarity originate. Never before in the history of humanity has this exploration of the "limits of meaning taken place in such an unprotected manner, and by this I mean without religious, mystical or any other justification" (141).

³ Hodgins has said that in presenting the reader with these myths, the writer has a large responsibility: "A fictional writer is creating myths and societies live by myths. The myths that are important to society create the way that people in it treat each other. Like John Gardner, I feel strongly that a writer has a responsibility to be aware of the moral implications of what he's doing" (Interview with Geoff Hancock 49).

⁴ We can see this belief reflected in The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne: the people of Port Annie are shirking responsibility by refusing to venture outside the safe world of their small town. Raime explains to Bowman why nobody

wants to confront the unknown: they would discover, and then be expected to realize, their heroic potential (124).

⁵ Hassan foresaw this in Radical Innocence when he warned that postmodernism could lead to the breakdown of the human form (20). Fiedler, in "The New Mutants," claimed to see this transformation taking place already.

⁶ Norman Mailer has voiced this postmodern belief in "The White Negro" and in his fiction. He argues that unless we confront the darkest and most dangerous possibilities, we cannot "be."

⁷ This belief is voiced throughout Hodgins' works. In The Invention of the World, for example, Becker and Lily come to the conclusion that we can do anything, that the human limitations we feel bound by do not actually exist (246).

⁸ Asked by Geoff Hancock if reality is "distorted when a fictional form is imposed on it", Hodgins answered, "Yes. That's why I tend to resist fictional forms which come from elsewhere. The forms of my stories have to grow out of the subject matter" (Interview with Hancock 48).

⁹ Michael Ondaatje has observed that Denham "is unable to cross over [the river] into the arena of pure myth" ("O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle" 28).

¹⁰ Robert Lecker, for example, has argued that in The Invention of the World the "process of uninvention undermines the assumption that the recovery of myth engenders the discovery of identity. . . Hodgins distorts, corrupts, and truncates

precisely the structures and patterns around which his double narratives are built . . . the mythological models on which the story is founded are themselves revealed to be corrupt" (86, 89). Susan Beckmann concurs with Lecker that Hodgins is undercutting myth in his work. She detects two tones in The Invention of the World, one which takes myth seriously, and another overriding tone which "satirizes" myth: "There are two distinct tones discernible in The Invention of the World," she states, "one results in a powerful and apparently serious examination of history, legend and myth . . . the other amounts to a burlesquing of Old and New World conventions, traditions, legends, and myths, and is satiric of the very things that in other parts of the book are looked at in a serious fashion" (106). Although she claims here that in certain passages, at least, myth is taken seriously, later in the article she says that the only reason Hodgins presents us with the myths is to burlesque them (123). Jan C. Horner is an exception here: she demonstrates that myth is being taken seriously in The Invention of the World ("Irish and Biblical Myth in Jack Hodgins' The Invention of the World").

¹¹ All page references for Jack Hodgins and His Work I am citing from the work when it was still in the form of an unpublished manuscript. Dr. Jeffrey had not received the galleys when I was preparing this dissertation.

¹² Hodgins has insisted that the world he portrays in his work is one which actually exists. "What may appear like "magic realism" to someone else is just "pure" realism to me.

I believe in my own fictions," he said in an interview with Geoff Hancock (57).

13 Whereas I had initially supposed that no literary form corresponds to Hodgins' notion of reality, Dr. David Jeffrey pointed out to me that in Biblical literature we can find such a form.

14 Hodgins is uneasy with the postmodern concepts of surfiction and fabulation, because, as David Jeffrey observes, "In Hodgins' own view, the purpose of his fiction is not to create, as Hancock has it, 'complete worlds of words,' but entirely the contrary: to signal an explicit referentiality in language and the visible world. Hancock himself records Hodgins' resistance to the label, and in his introduction actually quotes Hodgins as saying: 'It frightens me when literature becomes nothing but games with words The raw material of fiction is not language but people.'" (Jack Hodgins and His Work 21). "I'm using my language to describe the world as I see it" (Interview with Hancock 48).

15 Hodgins gave this explanation to Hancock: "What you and I call the ocean is to me only a metaphor. All those trees, for instance, are metaphors; the reality lies beyond them. The act of writing to me is an attempt to shine a light on that ocean and those trees so bright that we can see right through them to the reality that is constant" (Interview with Geoff Hancock 47).

16 David Jeffrey argues that Hodgins' portrayal of characters is not fantastic but an accurate portrayal of the

inhabitants of the West Coast: "the grotesque extravagance of his characters might seem plausible only in such a place. . . His characters are regional enough, as anyone who appreciates the North Island will cheerfully affirm" ("Jack Hodgins and The Island Mind" 71-72).

17 It was on March 31, 1983, giving a guest lecture to students of the course "Survey of Canadian Literature" that Hodgins mentioned he based his character Mad Mother Thomas on a woman who actually exists.

18 Those who defend the black humour that characterizes so much postmodern literature argue that it shows us how to survive in our uninhabitable world, without forfeiting our humanity. First of all, they claim, black humour shows us how to confront the horror of our world without being overcome by nausea. John Hawkes defends his use of black humour this way, saying that his intention is to show the reader what he can and must endure: his fiction, he explains, never "let[s] the reader . . . off the hook," "never let[s] him think that the picture is any less black than it is or that there is any easy way out of the nightmare of human existence" (quoted by Marcus Klein in "John Hawkes' Experimental Compositions" 206). He says that the driving force behind black humour is a "ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language" (quoted by Scholes in Fabulation and Metafiction 163). Robert Coover has defended his use of

black humour with a similar argument, that black humour shows us how to respond to horror constructively: "I tend to think of tragedy as a kind of adolescent response to the universe--the higher truth is a comic response . . . there is a kind of humor extremity which is even more mature than the tragic response" (Hertzel 28). Ronald Wallace sees black humour as a constructive response, arguing that "novelists like John Barth, John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabakov, Ken Kesey, Robert Coover, and others affirm laughter as a weapon against defeat and despair," and thereby teach us how to "face" "cosmic absurdity" (2, 14). Like Wallace, Robert Scholes sees black humour as teaching us how to survive: the black humorist, he says, "is concerned not with what to do about life but with how to take it" (Fabulation and Metafiction 147).

But the black humorist teaches us more than merely how to survive, proponents insist: he shows us how to retain our humanity in the face of horror. Scholes, for example, argues that black humour teaches us to be humane. It is "moral stimulation," he claims, because it prevents the reader from "warming [himself] with his secretly virtuous insides while [he] condone[s] the freezing of others" (160). He uses Hawkes as an example of a postmodern writer who uses black humour to keep the reader from becoming complacent about the morals he believes in (183). As Hawkes himself explains, in an interview with John Kuehl, "If you're made to laugh at a dismembered body, you experience the horror of dismembering in a different way from simply being confronted and repelled

by the stark shock of dismemberment. If part of the purpose of the picaresque is to make us aware of ourselves as possible dismemberers or possible victims, it's clear that we need to experience drastic shifts in what we perceive—hence the comedy" (175). Black humour, he says, takes an attitude "that rejects sympathy for the ruined members of our lot, revealing thus the deepest sympathy of all" (quoted by Klein in "John Hawkes' Experimental Compositions" 206). John Tilton shares Hawkes' belief that black humour is "compassionate"; it "precludes distancing," he argues, and "allows no intellectual detachment" (Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel 100).

Teaching us how to make the wasteland accommodate us once more, without losing our humanity, black humour "is an effort to defend and celebrate permanent human values," its proponents claim (Ronald Wallace 22). Hawkes explains that "comedy involves surprise, and total surprise would have to do with the vitality of life, the potential for life in a human being" (174). Hassan argues that black humour "may be understood as a way of making life possible in this world, despite evil or death" ("Laughter in the Dark: The New Voice in American Fiction" 636). Scholes insists black humour is a "sign of life and health" (161). While Hassan and Scholes do not explain why they see black humour as an affirmation of human values, Richard Boyd Hauck offers this reason: "laughter is the creative response, and despair, though logical, the purely nihilistic response" (8). Walter Kerr presents an argument very similar to Hauck's: "Comedy may

have sensed that we are slightly past angst now--not altogether, only slightly--and that from our earlier quailing before the void we have turned toward active investigation of the void" (Tragedy and Comedy 332).

Those opposed to black humour deny that it shows us how to retain our humanity in the face of horror. Max Schulz argues just the opposite, that "black humor condemns man to a dying world" (19). He approves of what Frye has defined as "new" comedy, which works out a "reconciliation of the individual with community" and allows "normality to triumph over abnormality" (19). Black humour, he complains, is not able to do this. In the novel of black humor, there is no triumph of the "green" world over the "wasteland" (19). Schulz claims that black humour simply voices the anxieties we feel living by an "irresolute value system" (27). He concedes that the novel of black humor does have a moral position, but refuses to take that position seriously (24). Bruce Janoff agrees that the vision black humour gives us does not affirm values, but quite the contrary, denies their existence. "The black humorist cannot assume there is a norm against which his fellow man may be judged," Janoff argues, "To the black humorist's further grief, he has access to no clear or correct frame of reference to which he might turn for moral or spiritual guidance" (15). "Within the artistic framework the black humorist is the artist closest to giving it all up," Janoff contends. "Like his existential forebearers, he is obviously enraged by the cul de sac of the

absurdist metaphysic, but unlike them he is on the verge of acknowledging that he is beaten in his feeble literary attempts to combat it" ("Black Humor, Existentialism and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion" 303).

While Janoff and Shulz feel the black humourist would like to provide us with solutions, but cannot see any, Feldman is more cynical, accusing the black humourist of playing games rather than attempting to address serious moral problems: "It is only playing, one knows that. No one will get hurt. If there seem to be pain or degradation or death on the page, the effect will be made incongruous with the fact, sidetracked into a gag, hammed up, parodied away" (159). He accuses the black humourists of practicing "affluent terrorism" and contrasts them with "real" terrorists who were "often [men] of resentment, dispossessed and declassed; feeling cheated, [they] could turn into . . . deadly enem[ies] of [their] society. Black Humor however springs from ~~affluence~~, not deprivation. It foments no revolutions, but only literary disdain for its perplexed and perplexing culture" (159). Like Feldman, Louis Hasley condemns the black humourists for being morally irresponsible, suggesting their vision is insincere; they adopt the stance they do, he claims, "out of a desire for individuality," "a desire to assume an intellectual position that mocks widely held values" (Black Humor and Gray, 325).

¹⁹ As David Jeffrey pointed out to me, Hodgins' use of the grotesque is similar to Flannery O'Connor's. O'Connor has explained why the grotesque depicts the truth more accurately

than conventional realism:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience (33-4).

For further reference, see Cecelia Coulas Fink's article "If Words Won't Do, and Symbols Fail: Hodgins' Magic Reality." Fink has observed that Hodgins' method is similar to that of Flannery O'Connor's--using the grotesque and the distorted to demonstrate the real.

²⁰ This belief that the truth is all possibilities, Hodgins shares with postmodernists. Matei Calinescu explains that "instead of the all-or-nothing attitude so typical of monologic thought, instead of the either/or of modernist consciousness, postmodernism does not seek the actual or at least the symbolic destruction of that which it opposes, but rather its conversion into a dialectical adversary, whose beliefs deserve to be considered" (637). She uses as a model of this way of thinking "Hassan's postmodernist (dialogic) defense of the imagination, seen as a matrix of possible worlds" (637).

²¹ In his article "Jack Hodgins and the Island Mind" David Jeffrey argues that the concern in Hodgins' work with

dividing lines between reality and myth reflects "the frustrated questions of a whole frontier-less continent now increasingly turned in upon itself and unable to discern where mythology stops and reality begins" (72).

Accounting for the Response of Hodgins, Kroetsch,
Ondaatje and Thomas to Postmodernism

Although the works of Kroetsch, Ondaatje, Thomas and Hodgins begin by celebrating the possibilities the philosophy of postmodernism holds out to us, they end by acknowledging the philosophy's inadequacies. The conclusion all four writers arrive at is that the philosophy is impractical, illogical and inhumane. All four come to the conclusion, in their later works, that the prescription for survival postmodernism offers us is impractical because it is based on unrealistic notions about human nature. Postmodernism believes that values are imposed on us, that if we were to live outside the bounds of morality and legality, we would cease to care about values, and would be free from the painful emotions we experience as beings concerned with values: jealousy, grief, horror, disgust. But the works of our four writers acknowledge what sociologists have documented: that those who choose to live an anarchic existence, recognizing neither laws nor morals, find themselves stricken with anxiety when they deprive themselves of values. Distressed, they begin to create new sets of values in place of the old ones.

The four writers we have surveyed have found the philosophy of postmodernism to be illogical, as well as impractical, because it is self-defeating. Postmodernism maintains that the only way to survive in a world growing increasingly violent is to become psychopathic, immune to

pain. But as the works of Thomas, Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Hodgins acknowledge, the psychopath's attempt to preserve himself proves self-destructive. Ridding himself of values to immunize himself to pain, he also rids himself of the will to live, because one of the values he rejects is the sacredness of life. The psychopathic society envisioned by postmodernism would soon be depopulated by self-destructive acts of murder and suicide.

Finally, Hodgins and Thomas state outright in their work what Kroetsch and Ondaatje imply: that the postmodern proposition that we turn ourselves into psychopaths to immunize ourselves to pain is morally unacceptable.

Given that the philosophy of postmodernism has these limitations, then, it would seem that the most constructive way for a writer to respond to that philosophy in his work would be to assess those limitations, and explore possible alternatives to the solutions postmodernism has given us. So far, there have not been many new solutions put forward: William Golding's Darkness Visible is one among few contemporary novels that does manage both to reject postmodernism's way of resolving the problem of anarchy, and to propose an alternative. It is Golding's Christian beliefs that afford him an answer. In his novel, even terrorism is part of providence, so that complete anarchy is never a possibility. Despite the terrorists' own intentions, the final perseverance of divine intervention can turn a terrorist act into a pattern of sacrifice and a redemption.

The terrorists' ends are thwarted, their act of evil transformed into a miracle so that those injured or killed by the violence are not left as victims but, ironically, as recipients of divine grace. This is not a solution which would present itself to most contemporary writers, who do not bring a religious perspective to the problem of anarchy. However, the problem may, in fact, be one which can be solved only in religious terms, and Golding's example may be one of the few solutions contemporary literature will afford.

This is not to suggest that the efforts of other contemporary writers have not been worthwhile. There are a number of writers, such as Rushdie, Márquez, and Pynchon, who, while they have been unable to arrive at any new solutions, have nevertheless gone further than many postmodernists, whose undertaking no longer seems as daring when compared to what these writers have ventured to take upon themselves. Postmodernists have responded more constructively than modern thinkers to the question of how we are to survive in an anarchic world, but even so, their attitude contains an overpowering cynicism that Pynchon, Rushdie and Márquez have not given in to.¹ They take a much more resistant stand against the problem, determined that humanity shall not compromise itself to survive. Instead of asking, with many postmodernists, "how shall we adapt to survive in such a world," they ask, "how can the world be changed to accommodate us once more?" Hence, they explore the possible causes of anarchy in hope of finding a way to

stop the growing violence and chaos in our world. Since politics seems to be at the root of anarchy, they have analyzed political upheavals and dictatorships, Rushdie, for example, exploring the uprisings in India and Pakistan, Márquez the juntas in South America, Grass the invasion of Poland. History, expressing itself as politics, recurs as a concern in the works of writers investigating anarchy, as they examine past events to detect the point at which the anarchy which now undermines our world began. Vonnegut, for example, looks back to World War II, and Pynchon is another who looks to the time of Hitler for an answer. As well as political history, Pynchon is interested in the history of technology, because he perceives a connection between technological advancement and anarchy. Pynchon's concern with what man has become in a technological age brings us to a third consideration: can the anarchy we are faced with now be accounted for in anthropological terms? Is anarchy a stage in the development of man? This is the possibility Doris Lessing considers in Memoirs of a Survivor, as does Russell Hoban in Riddley Walker. Finally, there is the possibility that preternatural forces are at work causing anarchy in our world. It is an orthodox devil who is identified over and over again in contemporary works as the source of chaos and violence: in Muriel Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye, in Iris Murdoch's A Fairly Honourable Defeat, in the works of William S. Burroughs and Rushdie. Golding posits both demonic and angelic forces so that the outcome of

Darkness Visible is not the triumph of evil, but of light. Matty, at first guided by angelic agents, and then, later, an agent himself, is able to triumph over the demonic forces trying to spread anarchy in his world.

Although critics liken the works of Ondaatje, Kroetsch, Hodgins and Thomas to the works of writers such as Rushdie, Márquez, and Pynchon, the response of these four Canadians to postmodernism has been of a different order, for they have not provided us with constructive criticism of the philosophy, nor are they searching for alternative solutions to the problem of anarchy. Although they eventually do come to discover inadequacy in the philosophy of postmodernism, initially they fail to see implications which seem to have been apparent from the very start to Pynchon, Rushdie and Márquez. And although these four Canadian writers achieve a great deal of insight into postmodernism as their work progresses, they do not seem to be able to respond constructively once they have achieved that insight. Hodgins abandons his investigation of postmodernism, alarmed by its implications, and Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Thomas cling in futility to the inadequate solutions postmodernism has given us, trying to deny that the implications of postmodernism are as grave as they seem.

Even the most disturbing tenets of postmodernism--that all things are permissible, and all things are possible--even these tenets did not trouble the Canadian writers initially. The tenet that everything is permitted initially suggested to them an ideal world, because they failed to consider all the

implications of such a premise. What presented itself to them was the vision of a world free of repressive moral and legal codes, where their characters did not have to obey tyrannical parents, teachers, bosses, clergymen and police who would have liked to prevent them from growing up. A completely permissive society might suggest itself as an ideal to Hodgins, Thomas, Kroetsch and Ondaatje, but other writers have realized how self-destructive a world without moral and legal codes would be. If all acts were permissible, then torture, rape and murder--all forms of atrocity--would be allowed.

Acts of atrocity are not only undesirable in themselves, but as Burroughs, Golding and Lessing appreciate, permissiveness would be destructive in other ways. A society collapses when it allows its members to commit offensive and harmful acts because the structures which keep society intact--marriage, family, community, friendship--cease to exist. These structures break down when there is no code of ethics governing human relations, because fidelity to one's spouse, respect for one's parents, responsibility toward one's children, consideration for one's neighbours, loyalty to one's friends--all cease to matter. As Burroughs sees it, a permissive society would fail to perpetuate itself: convinced that nothing mattered but self-fulfillment, the members of such a society would ultimately refuse to accept even the responsibility of procreation. Similarly, Golding conjectures that the members of a permissive society would

cease to cooperate, so obsessed with self-indulgence that they would fail to see that only by working together can they hope to survive. Lessing theorizes that in a truly permissive society, the concept of friendship would be corrupted until it meant something far different from what we understand it to be: it would come to mean a relation between victim and assailant; it would be our "friends" who would rob and murder us, since we would make the easiest targets. They would know our vulnerabilities better than anyone else's, and they would not feel love or loyalty or any other emotion that would inhibit them from killing us.

Just as the tenet that everything is permissible has disturbing implications, so too does ~~the~~ tenet that everything is possible, but again, Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas ignore those implications. In a world where all things are possible, extraordinary horrors will exist, but these writers do not take this into account. Interpreting the tenet quite narrowly, they conceive of a world of extraordinary marvels, beautifully and hilariously mysterious, but never horrifying. Hodgins envisions a world that was unbearably banal transformed by beautiful magic when a tidal wave sweeps through a dreary small town strewn with periwinkles and sea anemones that "bloom" on the ugly sidewalks and in the banal homes. The closest he comes to depicting the demonic is his character Damon West, who is such a bland devil that we realize Hodgins does not see the demonic as a problem. Hodgins inadvertently gives us a much more convincing portrayal of evil in Keneally, but he does

not take advantage of the opportunity Keneally provides him with to probe evil as realistically as he might. Ondaatje presents us with the beautiful mystery of Lalla's death: the supernatural forces which claim her are not dark or evil, so that death for her is strange but delightful, a rising above the mundane world she has grown tired of. Kroetsch complains that English Canadian writers have not explored the night world, but neither has he ventured there himself: when he depicts the extraordinary in his work it is usually as something not dark and evil, but beautiful, miraculous and wonderful: Vera's mystical encounter with the bees, or Web's marvellous experience, riding the tornado ("The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction"). When he does portray demonic forces, he presents them from a comic perspective: the way Kroetsch portrays the witch Marie Eshpeter, and the poltergeist that haunts Demeter's room, he is not addressing the possibility of demonic forces seriously. Writers such as Burroughs, Márquez, Rushdie and Golding do treat the possibility seriously: the problem of the demonic is real to them, and they give us far more insight into evil than the Canadian writers do. They give us the polar opposite of the beautiful mysteries the Canadian writers have conceived of: the balance of extraordinary monstrosities. Burroughs and Rushdie envision nightmarish creatures with Satanic powers. For Márquez and Golding, the extraordinary manifests itself in the form of not only beautiful marvels, but hideous abnormalities: especially

abnormalities of the psyche, such as monstrous obsessions and perverted natures.

The implications of these tenets are so obvious that one wonders how the four writers could have overlooked them. A willful naivety may be part of the explanation. With the possible exception of Hodgins, these writers do not want to acknowledge the categories of permissible and impermissible, and possible and impossible, because, in effect, they do not want to acknowledge either the concept of sin or the responsibility the individual assumes for his own actions when he recognizes he is capable of sinning.² This evasion is reflected in their attitude toward anarchy: they do not want to perceive anarchy as a problem, but rather, as a solution, an ideal. All of them, Hodgins included, lack a conception of positive law: they regard order as repressive, and celebrate its overthrow. Many of the citizens of Hodgins' Port Annie are not dismayed, but overjoyed at the anarchy brought by a tidal wave that sweeps through their town. Repressed by normalcy, by too much routine and morality in their lives, they rejoice when the wave disrupts the banal order of things and allows them to experience the extraordinary. Similarly, the citizens of Kroetsch's Edmonton celebrate the anarchy that disrupts the city when Hazard sets free all those like himself who are repressed by law and order. For Thomas' characters, life is joyless in an ordered world--they seek foreign countries unsettled by political upheaval to escape the stifling morality of their

occidental culture. Ondaatje's characters are so stifled by social conventions that they welcome any intrusion of anarchy into their lives, applauding the arsonists, insurgents, hijackers and criminals who overthrow order.

To take such an idealistic view of anarchy, a writer would have to overlook its dangerous and destructive consequences. (For Ondaatje, Hodgins, Kroetsch and Thomas, living in Canada, anarchy is not, in fact, very threatening. Their experience is very unlike that of writers such as Rushdie, Marquez and Grass who live where political problems have made anarchy an urgent problem that must be solved.

This accounts for the comic perspective on anarchy in their work. These four writers try to trivialize the question of anarchy rather than assume responsibility for making judgement on it, using humour as a smokescreen.³ Kroetsch defines anarchy as hilarious: to him it is exemplified by downtown Edmonton invaded by hundreds of horses. To Hodgins, it is a wedding reception disrupted by hundreds of rowdies. Ondaatje turns terrorism into a comedy routine: a hijacked train shunts back and forth all night between two stations while the British officers on board sleep through the crisis, unaware, and the hijacker, Mervyn Ondaatje, visits congenially with all his hostages. Thomas goes so far as to ridicule the notion that anarchy is dangerous: her characters visiting Latakia and Africa are ashamed for having feared for their lives. Taking a comic perspective allows these writers to avoid the responsibility

of assessing the code of conduct postmodernism defines for living in an anarchic world. Kroetsch does not have to comment on the moral implications, for example, of Web's act of setting fire to the house his father is in. Ondaatje does not have to judge Mervyn when he knocks a friend unconscious, or Lalla, when she tells an appalling lie to her sister-in-law. The comic perspective used in The Invention of the World allows Hodgins to avoid the implications of Maggie's behavior when she deserts her children, and Thomas does not have to deal with the moral questions that would have otherwise arisen in Blown Figures when Isobel abandons her family, telling Jason he can "keep the children", the same way one might tell a porter he can "keep the change."

But the moral concerns these writers try to evade haunt them, and eventually they abandon the comic perspective they have taken, to confront the reality of anarchy, and to assess postmodernism's response to anarchy. Two themes recur in their work which might suggest that they are aware of what they are not facing, and that they feel guilty about this evasion: one is the theme that the joker is dangerously irresponsible because his comic perspective on things is so unrealistic, and the other is the theme that we betray the ones we love most when we shirk our moral responsibilities. We have seen that in Kroetsch's work the energy of the trickster is portrayed as destructive. In Thomas' works the joker is portrayed as cruel and dangerously amoral: in Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures, Jack and the medical students who harass Isobel the summer she works at the mental

hospital harm others for their own amusement. We have seen that in Coming Through Slaughter and Running in the Family, although there is a reluctance to admit it, jokers like Buddy and Mervyn injure others. It is Hodgins' work that attaches the most importance to the question of the joker's lack of responsibility: we have seen that this question is central in The Invention of the World and "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Barclay Sisters!"

But the problem of hurting loved ones when we behave amorally seems to disturb these writers even more than the implications of the joker's amorality. Kroetsch's characters, for all their flippancy, cannot repress the guilt they feel when they hurt their friends, wives, and children living by the postmodern code of conduct. Similarly, Thomas' heroines are burdened with guilt knowing they have hurt their children and their lovers by deciding to dispense with traditional values and live according to the amoral code prescribed by postmodernism. We have seen that Ondaatje's Bolden has to face the painful truth that he has hurt his children, Nora, and his friend Jaelin with his amoral conduct. Again, it is in Hodgins' work that the problem is confronted most directly: even characters such as Wade, Fell and Weins, who have set out deliberately to immunize themselves against guilt, have to listen to their conscience in the end.

When our four writers finally realize the implications of the postmodern prescription for survival, they seem to

have no way of responding constructively. They betray a despair that writers such as Rushdie, Burroughs, Pynchon and Golding, do not seem to have felt when they confronted those same implications. In the works of Ondaatje, Thomas, Kroetsch and Hodgins we sense what is almost panic in their work as they realize how problematic postmodernism is. We find evidence in their writing that they do not know how to deal with the implications of postmodernism. Ondaatje confides in Running in the Family that he does not know how to write about the darkest implications of his father's postmodern code of conduct. There is evidence in Thomas' work that she cannot come to terms with the implications of postmodernism: she examines the same problems over and over again, as though there is something she is unable to resolve.⁴ Perhaps the "author" narrating Blown Figures, condemned like the narrator of Hubert Aquin's Prochaine Episode to be overwhelmed by the problems he cannot resolve in his novel, voices Thomas' own desperation at not being able to control the problems she is exploring in her work. We see Hodgins in the same uncomfortable position writing The Barclay Family Theatre: solutions which worked for him in Spit Delaney's Island, The Invention of the World and The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne are no longer valid in his latest work, so that his short stories end with their problems unresolved. Kroetsch too apparently had difficulties ending some of his works, and it would seem that these difficulties arose because of the implications of postmodernism that he had not foreseen. Nothing is resolved

in Gone Indian when Jeremy Sadness simply vanishes, and could be either dead or alive. Either way, the problems his postmodern conduct has given rise to have not been solved. Kroetsch has said that he did not know how to end Alibi: he could not tell whether it should end happily or sadly.⁵ His uncertainty would seem to suggest that he is no clearer than the reader as to what has happened to Dorf after his violation in the cave.

When these four writers have to acknowledge what postmodernism implies, then, they are brought to an impasse. Unlike writers such as Pynchon, Márquez, Rushdie and Grass, who foresaw the implications and were prepared to grapple with them in their work, Ondaatje, Hodgins, Kroetsch and Thomas are stymied. Even Hodgins, who has such a strong sense of moral responsibility toward his reader, does not attempt to answer the difficult ethical questions postmodernism leaves us with. Instead, he abandons his investigation of postmodernism, and while we can appreciate that his reason for doing this was a moral one, we wonder if his sense of moral responsibility is not misdirected here. He argues that the artist's purpose is to reveal only those truths which we are permitted to know, and postmodernism, it seems to him, raises questions that we are forbidden to ask. But other writers, such as William Golding and Anthony Burgess, do not see their moral responsibility to the reader defined this way. They feel that terrorism and anarchy have presented us with a crisis which must be confronted.

Apparently, since postmodernism has not given us an adequate solution to that crisis, they see it as their responsibility to come up with better solutions. While Hodgins judges it best to turn away from the philosophy of postmodernism, because the conclusions it leads us to are so monstrous, Golding and Burgess feel that it is more constructive to study the unethical propositions of postmodernism to be able to propose ethical alternatives.

Unlike Hodgins, Thomas does not abandon her investigation of postmodernism, even though she is as dismayed as he is by the implications of that philosophy. But this does not make her response any more constructive. Although she perseveres in her exploration of postmodernism, that perseverance is by no means fruitful. Instead of seeking answers which are more adequate than the ones postmodernism has given us, she reviews the same postmodern arguments over and over again, as though she cannot believe the conclusion those arguments bring her to each time, and therefore reexamines the premises in case there has been a mistake. Although Intertidal Life proposes a solution--"self-is-ness"--this philosophy is not an alternative, but postmodernism under a different name.

Kroetsch and Ondaatje try, illogically, to convince the reader, and themselves, that the implications of postmodernism are not as disturbing as they seem. We have already suggested an explanation for their irrational response to the challenge of postmodernism: apparently, they want to deny that the individual is capable of evil, as well

as good, and must accordingly take responsibility for individual actions. They are hounded, nonetheless, by a vestigial and typically Canadian conscience. Troubled, they retreat from the confrontation into slapstick. This reflex is, of course, intrinsically narcissistic: not just in Kroetsch and Ondaatje, but in Thomas as well, each refusing to admit the philosophy of postmodernism has alarming implications because postmodernism confirms narcissistic beliefs they are deeply committed to, and cannot afford to question. These beliefs are, specifically, that the world is so threatening we must make self-preservation our foremost concern; and that everything is permitted, so we may therefore use any means of self-defense to stay alive. We have said that postmodernists see anarchy and terrorism as immediate threats to our survival, but Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Thomas do not perceive them in such literal terms: for them, bombings, muggings and hostage-taking are only metaphors of a deadly assault upon our identity. For them, our problem is to keep our identity intact even though banality threatens to efface us, authority keeps us from asserting ourselves, and loved ones have the power to make us invisible. Thomas' heroines feel their identity disintegrating whenever they must occupy themselves with domestic chores or other activities they consider mundane and meaningless. They make a point of refusing to make meals, not because they are lazy, but because as artists they exist, but as caretakers, they do not. Banality threatens Kroetsch's characters the same way:

just as Thomas' characters feel they do not exist unless they are on an adventure, travelling in a foreign country, experimenting with unusual sexual practices, or holding jobs that will expose them to the unnatural and the monstrous, Kroetsch's characters flee from their banal homes where they are losing their identity, to reassert themselves by taking up a dangerous and unusual occupation. For Ondaatje's characters banality holds the same threat: during Lalla's years as a child and as a married woman, she did not exist. Only after she becomes a widow does she come into being, because she is free from the banal way of life that had always been imposed upon her. It is too much order which makes a world banal, and while banality itself is a threat to identity, the source of the problem is authority, the power which enforces order. The characters in the works of all three authors lose their sense of identity when they must subordinate themselves to those wielding authority, depicted most often in Thomas' works as tyrannical parents, in Kroetsch's and Ondaatje's works, as parents and police. But for these writers, it is finally loved ones who pose the biggest threat to identity. Thomas' characters are horrified by the sensation of vanishing when loved ones withhold from them their approval. Kroetsch's heroes feel effaced by the contempt of their wives and lovers. Ondaatje's characters feel their loved ones devour them: Billy sees Angie as a mouth that will swallow him, and all the women Bolden has been consumed by are symbolized by "Crawley's girl's tongue" (Coming Through Slaughter 130). Lalla has a horror of the

babies she must feed, because she feels they will devour her with their needs.

Thomas, Ondaatje and Kroetsch see "legitimized" narcissism as the best means of keeping intact an identity which threatens to disintegrate. Therefore, the postmodern tenet that everything is permitted seems attractive to them because, although it sanctions atrocity, it also sanctions narcissism. Thus they are afforded justifications for self-love that no other philosophy would provide them with. Thomas is straightforward in her depiction of the cruelty those who adhere to a postmodern code of conduct are capable of, yet she herself adheres to the philosophy of postmodernism so that she may assert that selfishness or "self-is-ness," as she prefers to call it, is an ideal we all must strive for. Her characters seek a way of life that would allow them to indulge themselves to the fullest without having to give of themselves to others. Ondaatje concedes that his characters are selfish, but challenges the reader's assumption that selfishness is a vice. He argues that far from being a flaw in his characters' nature, selfishness is their most admirable quality. In his works, it is a heroic achievement to be a celebrity: anonymity is contemptible. Ondaatje portrays the narcissist's rebellion against law and morality as a heroic contest in which self-assertion, self-reliance and self-indulgence allow the hero's ego to triumph over the powerful force of society. We see Kroetsch take the same view of selfishness: while he deplores the implications

of postmodernism, nevertheless he presents narcissism as a heroic defiance in his works: when his characters find a way to deny that society exists, and learn to live without having to respect laws and morals, or commit themselves to others, they have won a heroic victory.

It is a commitment to narcissism then, which keeps these writers from responding logically and constructively to postmodernism. They contradict themselves by acknowledging the implications of postmodernism, and then turning right around and denying those implications, because while they are prepared to admit that postmodernism is an inadequate response to anarchy, they allow their desire to justify "self-is-ness" to override their concern that postmodernism sanctions atrocity. Anarchy and atrocity are not their immediate concerns: what is more important to them is that postmodernism upholds self-serving narcissism as an ideal. Therefore, they waffle, deploring postmodernism, yet celebrating it too.

But there is another way that their narcissistic views have kept them from responding as constructively as other contemporary writers to postmodernism. We have seen that writers such as Márquez, Rushdie and Pynchon object to the postmodern attitude that we cannot prevent anarchy, and must therefore adapt to it. These writers refuse to view anarchy as inevitable, and turn to theories about the cause of anarchy in hope of discovering ways to prevent it: the theory that the cause of our present state of anarchy lies in past events, the theory that anarchy has political causes, the

theory that anarchy is a stage in the evolution of man, and, finally, the theory that demonic forces are responsible for the anarchy that threatens us today. Although these theories are central to the works of contemporary writers in nearly every part of the world--Britain, Asia, the United States, Central and South America, and Europe--we do not find them treated seriously in the works of Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Thomas. It is a narcissistic reluctance to concern themselves with politics, history, human evolution, and the possibility of the supernatural that keeps them from addressing a problem which so many other contemporary writers see as crucial.

It is because the narcissist has no social and historic consciousness of things that he has no interest in the political state of the world, historic events, or the evolution of man. The narcissist simply refuses to be socially and historically aware. As Lasch has explained, the narcissist lives for the present only, refusing to bear responsibility for the past or the future, partly because he feels he owes nothing to the generations to come, partly because he does not want to feel guilt for what has been committed in the past. Consequently he attaches no significance to historical events (The Culture Of Narcissism 23). The narcissist is equally disinterested in politics because, again, he resents social responsibility. Preoccupied with self-preservation, he is uninterested in the survival of states and nations. In his work, Ondaatje makes

no attempt to explain anarchy in historical or political terms, although the opportunity is there for him to investigate both possibilities. Because he cannot see history as anything but a reflection of himself, it never occurs to him to investigate the connection between historical events and anarchy. His ego prevents the past from existing in his works: although he uses figures from the past--Billy the Kid, and Buddy Bolden--he does not present them as historic figures, but as reflections of himself. He takes no responsibility for reconstructing the truth of the past because he does not care what happened then--only now matters, and he narcissistically superimposes his present on top of history. Ondaatje also displays the narcissist's lack of concern for political issues, especially in Running in the Family. Much of the work is set during the time of Sri Lanka's struggle for independence, but Ondaatje does not seriously explore the political implications of anarchy, preoccupied with his family, and more specifically, with how the family reputation reflects on him.⁶ While Rushdie, Grass and Márquez seek answers to the problem of anarchy by investigating political upheaval, Ondaatje overlooks this avenue of investigation, seeing little more significance in the uprising in Ceylon than the fact that the insurgents thought so highly of the Ondaatjes that they spared them, and even invited Susan Ondaatje to play cricket with them.

Unlike Ondaatje, Kroetsch appears to have an explanation for anarchy in his works, but we realize how limited his explanation is when we consider what a narrow concept of

anarchy he has. He thinks of anarchy on a very small scale: the individual rebelling against society. This level of anarchy he can explain: a sane, decent individual breaks the law or disregards morality when the legal and moral codes of his society have become too repressive. But the problem of anarchy cannot be reduced to something that simple, and in works such as The Studhorse Man and Badlands Kroetsch is called upon to view anarchy as a much more complex phenomenon: the political movement of the Dukhobors in Western Canada, the political and social disorder brought on by both World Wars, and the overthrow of the natural order of things with the advent of PMU farms. Kroetsch has no interest in exploring anarchy at this level, because his narcissism dictates a narrow scope of interest. We have seen that writers such as Grass and Rushdie consider history and politics to be important areas of investigation to the contemporary writer, but Kroetsch, in his work, presents the narcissist's argument that these are areas that should be ignored. The narcissist's argument runs this way: seeking to determine how the past has influenced the present, we efface ourselves, allowing the past to impose itself upon us. Those in Kroetsch's work who insist upon interpreting the present in the light of the past are depicted as allowing the past to entomb them. Perhaps this is why although Kroetsch alludes to both World Wars in The Studhorse Man and Badlands and implies that there is a connection between those wars and the anarchic way of life characters such as Hazard and Web are

living, he does not try to explain that connection. It may account for his superficial concern with the Dukhobors in The Studhorse Man and it may explain why, in the same novel, he does not try to account for the nightmarish course of man's evolution to the point where he has become an anarchic creature bent on destroying himself by perverting the natural order of things, having found a way to stop procreation.

While Ondaatje appears oblivious to the relation of history and politics to anarchy, and Kroetsch refuses to examine it, Thomas is obviously impressed by the relation, setting her work in places such as London, disrupted by attacks from the IRA; Ghana during and after a political coup; Ras Shamra, symbolic of the collapse of order and progress, because it is the site of the world's most ancient alphabet, yet now a civilization in ruins; and Mexico City, its famous mummies a disturbing comment on the self-destructive course civilization is taking. But while Thomas appreciates that there must be historical and political explanations for the anarchic state her characters find their world in, she never works out those explanations, too preoccupied with the narcissistic problem of self-preservation. Although she sets many of her short stories, and two of her novels in politically troubled Africa, she is not interested in finding a political solution for states plagued by anarchy, as was Malcolm Lowry writing Under the Volcano or--the most appropriate example here--as was David Godfrey writing New Ancestors. In Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures the political situation in Ghana is no more than an analogy

for Isobel's identity crisis.⁷ Furthermore, that analogy is not explored very far: although the political state of the country is meant to parallel Isobel's mental state, we are not afforded enough of a picture of that political state to find the analogy convincing. It is difficult to be persuaded of the parallel when Isobel herself is so unaware of the political events around her that she assures us she had not even noticed a military coup had taken place, preoccupied as she was with her collapsing marriage.

While Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures do not claim to treat Africa as anything more than a metaphor, "Two in the Bush" purports to be concerned with African politics. Because the work pretends to be concerned with political issues, Thomas' failure to respond to the political implications of postmodernism seems that much more serious. We are supposed to believe that the heroine of the story has a strong understanding of the political problems in Africa: she modestly insists she knows nothing about politics, but we are not supposed to take her protestations seriously. However, it is hard to believe the claim the work is making, that Isobel knows the "real" Africa. After her trip to the Ivory Coast, to meet with gun runner Joao Kakumba, Jimmie Owusu-Banahene puts a tribal mark on her forehead to show she is one of the initiated, but the reader questions this because nothing in her experience suggests she has learned about African politics. She has risked her life staying in a disreputable hotel, and walking the streets alone all night.

Although the occasion never arises, she was prepared to sleep with Joao, knowing full well he might murder her. But it is not clear how these "trials" have made her more politically aware. Even when she is confronted violently with the political situation in Ghana, stopped by Busia's men, and held at knife-point, the work affords us with no proof that she has acquired any insight.⁸

Just as Thomas overlooks important implications when she uses Africa as her setting, so too does she fail to achieve much insight considering the terrorism in Britain. We appreciate this when we contrast her short story "Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe" with the novels of Bainbridge and Golding. Thomas' short story seems politically naive compared with novels such as Darkness Visible and Injury Time which analyze the problem of terrorism so much more thoroughly. In "Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe" the problems London is facing, beset by IRA terrorists, are subordinate to the problems Marguerite is having with the men in her life. The issue of anarchy is so peripheral in this short story that Marguerite's brief reflections on the IRA seem superfluous.

Thomas seems to appreciate that history, like politics, is a concern writers should be addressing, and therefore includes it in the scope of her work, but she pushes history to the periphery of her novels and short stories, and focusses instead on questions of self-preservation. This is why, in Latakia Rachel's trip to Ras Shamra affords her no explanation for the present state of the world. Her visit to the site of the world's oldest alphabet should have afforded

her an answer: there, she can trace the evolution of man, from the time that he acquired language. Rachel does acquire a certain amount of insight: "Nothing ever changes," she realizes, "People don't get any better as their language gets more sophisticated" because "once you get beyond letters, into words, into emotions and ideas, it doesn't help at all" (Latakia 171). But compared to the observations a writer such as Pynchon has made on the evolution of man, and its relation to anarchy, Thomas' observations do not enlighten us very much. Rachel's insights are no more than a starting point--Thomas could explore much further, but instead, she reintroduces Michael into the scene, and with him, the egocentric concerns of the novel. We see narcissistic concerns overshadow historic ones in "The More Little Mummy" as well. Rachel, trying to account for the anarchy in her life, visits the exhibit of mummies in Mexico City. Thomas seems to see here the possibility of explaining anarchy in anthropological terms: studying the mummies, the remains of an ancient civilization, we might come to understand why the course of man's evolution has been a self-destructive one. But this is not what happens in the short story. Thomas turns Rachel's investigation into a narcissistic search for the self, rather than a search for ways to explain anarchy. Thomas uses the mummies as nothing more than a reflection of Rachel's state of mind, instead of considering what they tell us about the development of civilization.

While Ondaatje, Kroetsch and Thomas at least allude to the theories other contemporary writers are exploring, that anarchy might have historic, political or anthropological causes, they seem unwilling to consider the possibility that demonic forces might be responsible for the anarchic state of our world. It is easy to appreciate why they would not wish to entertain the theory: the narcissist acknowledges no reality greater than himself, and therefore does not admit to the existence of the supernatural, including the demonic. Perhaps this explains why in Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures it is insisted upon that the witches pursuing Isobel do not really exist, but are simply projections of Isobel's guilt. Kroetsch, too, perceives the demonic not as something supernatural, but as a dimension of ourselves, a projection of our unconscious drives. Marie Eshpeter, her mother, and Bea Sunderman are figurative, not literal representations of the supernatural, symbolizing an aspect of ourselves: the irrational sexual appetite. Unlike Kroetsch and Thomas, Ondaatje, in Running in the Family, does claim there is a force greater than ourselves which is responsible for the anarchy in our world, but it is not a claim he makes seriously. Lalla seems to be governed by supernatural forces that compell her to create anarchy wherever she goes, but Ondaatje treats this explanation comically, and continues to define anarchy throughout the work as an inexplicable phenomenon.

But in spite of the limited perspective narcissism imposes on them, Ondaatje, Thomas and Kroetsch have acquired

some insight into the question of anarchy, and perhaps in future works will probe even further. Ondaatje, like Hoban, Lessing, and Pynchon, has realized that to understand anarchy, we must understand the effect technology has had on mankind. His investigation of that effect is as perceptive as Pynchon's, and surpasses that of Hoban and Lessing. The narcissist, concerned only with the present, cares nothing for what man has been or what he will become, but Ondaatje, whose concerns tend to be egocentric, reveals a social consciousness in The Collected Works of Billy The Kid defining the psychological impact technology has had on us, and predicting what we will become if we continue to think of ourselves as machines. He draws a direct connection between technology and the anarchic state of the world: we have forgotten the natural order of things, and live in anarchy instead, because technology has transformed us into machines, and set us at war with all things which are animate.

Thomas appreciates that if we are to understand the anarchic state of our world, we must explore the breakdown of language, the collapse of morality, and the corruption of politics. Unfortunately, her investigation of these issues is always sidetracked by the narcissistic questions that inevitably predominate in her work, but we can see explanations of anarchy, scarcely formulated as yet, beginning to take shape at the periphery of her narcissistic vision. In Mrs. Blood she makes the suggestion, which unfortunately she does not explore very far, that some cultures sanction

violence, and are therefore anarchic. But the theory of anarchy that she articulates most fully is that the world is in a state of anarchy because language does not serve us well enough. Short circuits between word and world allow us to commit atrocities without having to admit what we have done.

Kroetsch suggests in his work that oppressive moral and legal codes lead to anarchy. In his novels, the members of a society reach a point where they refuse to relate to each other, when laws and morals make the terms of their relationships intolerable. Kroetsch experiments with the idea of a new social code which would define human relations so that people would want to belong to families and communities, instead of seeking to isolate themselves from others. In Alibi, Kroetsch envisions a community that even Dorf, so terrified of human relations, wants to be part of, because here relations are not based on power: nobody has political, financial, sexual or emotional control over anyone else.

These insights into the problem of anarchy, while they are not yet very profound, let us conclude that Ondaatje, Thomas and Kroetsch will get around the impasse postmodernism has brought them to. Hodgins, unhampered by a narcissistic vision, should find it easier than the other three writers to redirect his work beyond the limits of postmodern argument, as long as he has not become overly cautious of exploring, after postmodernism led him to investigate where he would rather not have ventured.

Even if Kroetsch, Thomas, Ondaatje and Hodgins never do

achieve what writers such as Pynchon, Golding, Márquez, Burgess and Grass have, their investigation of postmodernism has allowed them to address a problem that has created difficulties for Canadian writers, apparently right from the time the first literary works of this country were being written. Insisting that everyday life is informed as much by the extraordinary as it is by the mundane, Canadian writers have been thwarted in their attempt to portray life this way by limitations imposed upon them by the forms they have been using. Some Canadian writers have tried to use the gothic genre, while others have chosen realism, but neither have succeeded in depicting this view of life. The gothic genre, while it recommended itself to Canadian writers because it addresses the irrational, the supernatural, and the grotesque, did not prove suitable because it makes too hyperbolic a statement, denying that existence has a banal as well as a bizarre side. Those writers who attempted to add to the gothic form a dimension of the mundane in their work inadvertently created a comic effect: for example, John Richardson creates a bathos he did not intend when he introduces into his gothic settings details that are inappropriately realistic: the warm sunshine he insists upon, creating the atmosphere for the scene in which the soldiers must venture outside the walls to retrieve a body, is humourously incongruous with the dark gothic fort, the groaning chains of the drawbridge, and the impenetrable darkness of the forest.

Realism, like the gothic genre, is able to depict some aspects of existence exactly as the Canadian writer wishes them to be portrayed, but not all of them. Realism does not understand the extraordinary to be part of experience. Innovative writers in Canada have always managed to assert, in spite of the limitations of realism, that even at the most mundane level of existence, we experience the bizarre. Unfortunately, they were not able to push their assertion very far. If they presented definitions of reality broader than realism allowed, this put a strain on their work. Therefore, they qualified those definitions so that they would not conflict with the definition of reality insisted upon by realism, and in making those qualifications conceded to realism that life is as banal and predictable as realism says it is. O'Hagan, for example, annexes legend to realism in an attempt to assert that while most men we will know in our everyday lives will be insignificant, we might also encounter an extraordinary being like Tay John. He does not make the assertion successfully: realism cannot accommodate a man who is at once human and supernatural, and therefore Tay John, instead of appearing as O'Hagan must have intended, as a god among lesser men, is a comic hyperbole. Sinclair Ross, wanting to show that life in a small prairie town during the Depression was at once monotonous and trivial, yet unnatural and sinister, had difficulty presenting such a picture of existence because the unnatural lies outside the bounds of realism. By presenting the novel from Mrs. Bentley's point of view, Ross found a way to address the

unnatural and the sinister in his work, but the most he can claim is that this is how the world seems to Mrs. Bentley. El Greco only seems wolfish and sinister to her: because of the limits of realism, he is necessarily an ordinary dog (134). Similarly, O'Hagan, in Tay John, can do no more than assert that the world seems sinister and grotesque to Denham. It only seems that Juana's face is a jack-o-lantern, and that she is running on her knees (Tay John 237, 238). It only seems to him that Tay John has just risen out of the earth.

A subjective point of view is one strategy, then, that many Canadian writers have used to depict existence as less predictable and commonplace than realism presents it to be; figurative language is another. But again, the strategy does not allow them to push their claim too far: figurative language can describe a reality stranger than the literal language of realism, but we do not read it as a language referential to anything that actually exists. Therefore, Ostenso and Atwood, with their use of figurative language, like O'Hagan and Ross with their use of subjective point of view, can do no more than suggest that the world seems bizarre and sinister to certain characters. In Wild Geese, when Lind calls Judith a "centauress," Fusi Aronson "some giant defender of a forgotten race", and Caleb "the devil himself" we are too aware that these are simply expressions to regard these people as the superhuman beings Lind sees them as (16, 70, 77). Similarly, in Atwood's Surfacing, when the narrator likens an unborn baby to a frog in a jar, a

career to an artificial limb, and Joe's unsold pottery to murder victims hidden in a basement, we feel the nightmarish world these comparisons evoke exists only for her, because the realistic form of the novel presents a very different world to us (38, 60, 66).

While writers such as O'Hagan, Ostenso, Ross and Atwood had limited success depicting a world which is at once familiar and alien, commonplace and extraordinary, as Geoff Hancock has observed, in "Magic Realism, or The Future of Fiction," the technical breakthroughs inspired by postmodernism have allowed Kroetsch and Hodgins - and we can add to his list Ondaatje and Thomas - to depict this paradox. Postmodernism changed radically the way writers and critics viewed the relation between word and world, the relation between the writer and his work, and the relation between the reader and the work. As these relations were redefined, literary forms changed, since many of the assumptions underlying them no longer seemed valid. The scope of realism has been called into question: its definition of reality has been broadened to include experiences it once assumed were outside the range of ordinary existence. Kroetsch, Hodgins, Ondaatje and Thomas, inspired by the new ways of thinking about literature, the creative process, and the act of reading, have experimented with realism and found ways to make it express the view of existence that has long been trying to surface in Canadian literature: that the everyday is never as commonplace and predictable as we assume.

For Hodgins and Kroetsch, what this implies is that

although we live in a mundane world, the miraculous is possible. The preternatural may intrude into our lives, and we may transcend our human limitations. To make realism address these implications, both writers merged it with a much older form, the tall tale, to come up with a literary form that makes startling claims about reality without creating undesired tension in the work, claims such as the one they make that the order of things is not natural, but supernatural, that the cycle of the seasons can stop, and the world can slide into the sea. Or their claim that man is more than mortal, and can fly, or even come back to life. Kroetsch and Hodgins have had to experiment with form because neither romance nor realism depicts existence as they see it: both banal--because (of our human limitations--and mysterious--because of benign forces at work even at the most mundane level of existence. Realism, which views man's existence as antiheroic, would not allow Kroetsch and Hodgins to depict birth, death and love the way they see these experiences--as deep mysteries. Romance would let them portray life as marvellous, but would not allow them to present their view that life is also undeniably banal. But the tall tale gives us a vision of the world that corresponds to that of Hodgins and Kroetsch. It is a form which, like realism, claims to be referential to the mundane world we know, and which, like romance, allows the supernatural to exist, and allows men to have heroic powers. It lets Kroetsch and Hodgins depict man as they see him--not as an

absurd and antiheroic fool, as he is defined by realism, nor as a superhuman being, as romance defines him, but as a paradoxical creature with both heroic capability and human limitations. The tall tale allows Hodgins and Kroetsch to portray man as comic, but not contemptible, as a hero we laugh at, but also admire: Joe Lightning, a small town pool player who also flies like a god; Web, the clown who gets seasick at the helm, and is blackballed in a brothel, yet also makes love to Anna Yellowbird, when, like gods, they ride a tornado; Larry Bowman, so overwhelmed by love that he falls down the stairs, and gets stomach cramps, yet has the heroic strength and spirit to carry Fell out of the path of the mud slide.

Like both Kroetsch and Hodgins, Thomas has complained that realism depicts existence as more mundane than it really is. In her view, realism depicts not reality, but our misperception of reality. Art that we think looks like life does not tell us the truth, because the true shapes of things are not the shapes we see. This is why Isobel sees a man who casts the shadow of a lion: the lion-shaped shadow is a truer picture of the man than his human form, which belies his monstrous nature. Thomas attempts to show us that what seems banal and commonplace is actually monstrous. To do this, she uses the same strategies Vonnegut does in Slapstick, translating the shapes of things we are familiar with into alien, sinister shapes which come closer to representing the truth. Human forms become monstrous in her work: in Blown Figures (the title itself suggesting this device) Mrs.

Hankinson is a transparent creature with her bowels hideously revealed, and Isobel is a birdlike monster. In Mrs. Blood the staff nurse is a frog out of a book for children. Jason is depicted throughout Thomas' work as a dark giant. In her African stories, mankind is a mass of crippled, leprous creatures scarcely recognizable as human beings. Thomas uses a similar technique, translating familiar settings into alien hells: department stores, cafeterias, train stations, even kitchens become nightmarish places. The more mundane the setting, the more Thomas is able to startle the reader with her device: it is probably Isobel's kitchen which disturbs us the most, then, green mambas shooting out of the oven when she opens the door, hundreds of cockroaches swarming out of the coffee pot, thousands of flies in the red and green parfaits in the refrigerator.

By translating familiar shapes into ones which are strange and deformed, Thomas renders a realistic vision grotesque. The grotesque has been defined as a vision which presents us with a world which we know we should recognize, but find alien and sinister. The world we had thought was so accommodating and predictable is suddenly threatening and unknown to us. Transforming a realistic vision into a grotesque one, Thomas, like Vonnegut, has created a more effective form of autobiographical expression: by its very nature, autobiographical fiction is intimate, and is perhaps most intimate when it must document domestic horrors, but the conventions of realism--which the writer of autobiography has

traditionally used--impede this documentation because they address only the most banal kinds of human relations. We appreciate how much more Thomas can say using a grotesque vision, when we compare her earlier autobiographical works with later ones. Isobel's relations with her parents and her sister, and with her lovers, seem bland and normal in Songs My Mother Taught Me; it is not until Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures that Thomas is able to convince us that those relationships are vampiric and sadistic.

Like Thomas, before Ondaatje could express in fiction his belief that existence is much more bizarre than we realize, he had to create a new kind of fiction that made the same assumptions about existence as does the nonsense rhyme. He had to find a way to make fiction depict the everyday as strange and sinister, and the extraordinary as commonplace. He succeeded in doing this by changing all the principles that govern the way a writer describes a setting, or relates an event, or portrays a character. Ondaatje makes the flames on a gas stove, the strap on Nora's dress, the oranges on Billy's bed, and the callouses on Sally's feet look almost threatening, they appear so strange. They seem menacing because Ondaatje's focus on them is so intense and so seemingly inexplicable. We expect a description of Billy's recovery from his burns, not a graphic description of Sally's calloused feet:

For three days, my head delirious so much I thought I was going blind twice a day, recognizing no one,

certainly not the Chisums, for I had been brought out cold and dropped on their porch by someone who had gone on without waiting even for water for himself. And Sallie I suppose taking the tent sheet off my legs each morning once the shutters closed. Her shoes off, so silent, she moves a hand straying over the covers off John's books, till she comes and sits near me and puts her feet up shoeless and I reach to touch them and the base of them is hard like some semi-shelled animal but only at the base, the rest of her foot being soft, oiled so smooth, the thin blue veins wrapping themselves around the inside ankle bone and moving like paths into the toes, the brown tanned feet of Sallie Chisum resting on my chest, my hands rubbing them, pushing my hands against them like a carpenter shaving wood to find new clear pulp smelling wood beneath. My own legs black with scars (The Collected Works of Billy the Kid 34-5).

We expect to be told what Bolden and Nora are thinking as Bolden tries to explain Bellocq's strange request to her-- instead, what we are given is a hyperrealistic description of the blue flames on the stove:

Listen Nora you have to do this for me. Let him take some pictures of you. Just this once to show the others it's ok, I promise you it'll be ok. She had moved into the kitchenette and was looking for a match to light the gas. He came over, dug one out of his

pocket and lit the row of hissing till they popped up blue, something invisible finding a form. He let her fill the kettle and put it on. Then he put himself against her back and leaned his face into her shoulder. His nose against the shoulder strap of her dress. Come out with me into the hall and meet him. Give him some of this tea. He's a harmless man. He put his head up a bit and watched the blue flame gripping the kettle (Coming Through Slaughter 124-5).

Similarly, the close-up view, in The Collected Works, of the oranges on the white sheet, disorients us when what we expect to focus on is the exchange taking place between the characters, who seem blurred unaccountably in the background:

She leans against the door, holds
her left hand at the elbow
with her right, looks at the bed

on my sheets--oranges
peeled half peeled
bright as hidden coins against the pillow

she walks slow to the window
lifts the sackcloth
and jams it horizontal on a nail
so the bent oblong of sun
hoists itself across the room
framing the bed the white flesh
of my arm

she is crossing the sun
sits on her leg here
sweeping off the peels. . . (21).

Just as Ondaatje challenges our notions of what is normal and what is bizarre by describing familiar objects from an unexpected point of view, so, too, he uses an unusual

perspective when telling a story, to make extraordinary events seem routine. To do this, he uses a unique narrative stance found in much contemporary fiction, the stance taken by the psychopath to protect himself, when he declares that nothing amazes, horrifies or disgusts him. No matter how wondrous, alarming, or atrocious the event, the narrator describes it as a routine occurrence. Ondaatje's narrator in Coming Through Slaughter describes both the strange death of Mrs. Bass, and her daughter's bizarre reaction to that death, as nothing out of the ordinary. In The Collected Works when the dying Gregory is attacked by a chicken which takes hold of the vein in his neck, and stretches it for yards, the incident is narrated with complete indifference: in this world, nothing is violent enough or bizarre enough to evoke an exclamation.

But perhaps it is his unconventional way of portraying character that allows Ondaatje more than anything else to depict existence as bizarre yet utterly banal. While he does portray Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden as eccentric and extraordinary individuals, the point Ondaatje really wants to stress is not that their lives were so much different than ours, but so very similar. Ondaatje convinces us that existence is stranger than we thought, not only by showing us how extraordinary the world of Billy and Buddy is, but also how undeniably mundane their lives are. We wonder how accurate our definitions of normal and abnormal are, not just when we hear that Buddy, in an extraordinary fit of temper,

shattered a window with his hand without actually making the glass fall, or cutting himself, but also when we are given a portrait of him walking his children to school, giving each of them two fingers to hold onto. Similarly, we question our assumptions about normal and abnormal behaviour, not just when we are told that Billy killed a man when he was twelve, but also when he wakes after drinking too much, and vomiting all night, and finds the sun shining on the clean white sheets beautiful.

Because of the technical discoveries Hodgins, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Thomas have made, Canadian writers can now negotiate a silence which presented itself to them before as a barrier. Because form put so many restrictions on what they could say, in the works of many Canadian authors, there is a story that could never be told: a very striking example is Howard O'Hagan's Tay John, but in many other works, too, although it is not this apparent, there is a story that the writer has not been able to tell. At best, he can refer to it obliquely: we detect a story that cannot be articulated in the understatement, irony and figurative language prevalent in Canadian literature. We appreciate the achievement of Hodgins, Kroetsch, Thomas and Ondaatje, then, when we observe that while O'Hagan finally could not tell the story of Tay John, none of his experiments with form leading to the discovery he needed, these other four writers are able to tell stories far more unspeakable than the tale of Tay John: the stories of Keneally, Fat Annie, Buddy Bolden, Vera Lang and the patients on Ward 88.

But while they have achieved what their predecessors could not, all four writers are calling their achievement into question. Having discovered a "new dark unknown alphabet" that allows them to voice what could not be expressed before, they are starting to realize that some things must never be given utterance to, even if we can find the words to break the silence with (Running in the Family 150). It would be regrettable if these writers, and other writers who will be influenced by their work, let this knowledge deter them from presenting us with a particular vision that Canadian literature has never had a voice for: the vision of man discovering the miraculous in a banal world. Contemporary Canadian painters have already discovered how to depict this: artists such as Alex Colville and Christopher Pratt have revealed to us that what is commonplace and ordinary is also mysterious and preternaturally beautiful, and therefore is not meaningless, but part of a design.

Now that Hodgins, Thomas, Kroetsch and Ondaatje have discovered forms that allow the marvellous to be treated as part of everyday existence, perhaps this experience can be portrayed in Canadian literature as well as in Canadian painting. As Hancock has observed, in "Magic Realism, or The Future of Fiction," the vision Danby and Colville have achieved in their paintings, Hodgins and Kroetsch are now achieving in their fiction (4). We see that all four writers have depicted such an experience, and although it is not

always central to their work, perhaps it will become more significant to them. Certainly, it is the focus of Hodgins' work: the revelation experienced by Joseph Bourne, which allows him to love the community he had thought was dreary and despicable, is just one example. We see this experience depicted in Kroetsch's later works; at the end of What the Crow Said, for example, he gives us a vision of man consoled by the knowledge that a miracle could take place in his banal life at any moment, making what was impossible a reality: Kathy Lang walks barefoot over the fields, at one with her world, confident her husband will be returned to her one day. Ondaatje shows us that everyday life is marvellous in his narration of Lalla's death: as she dies, she sees her familiar world strangely but beautifully transformed. Even Thomas, whose work makes so little allowance for the possibility that our everyday lives might be touched by a mysterious force beyond us, has depicted this experience. We find it portrayed but once, in the short story "Natural History": the unnamed central character and her daughter Clytie feel they have reached a mystic union with the universe as they lie outside under the stars.

Certainly the possibility that Hodgins, Kroetsch, Thomas and Ondaatje are depicting here is a strange and disturbing one, because most of us do not believe in the miraculous. Perhaps the nightmare possibilities postmodernism would have us consider should be consigned to silence, but not this possibility of the miraculous. Unlike the vision postmodernism has given us, this one is not an obscene vision

of human nature corrupting itself to adapt to hell. It is, rather, a vision of man risen to heroic stature, and reconciled to his world because he has learned to participate in its mystery. Robert Scholes has called for just such a vision:

Alienation has been willed, desired by man. Having reached the point where we understand this, we can see that the great task of the human imagination for the present time is to generate, in literature and in life, systems that bring human desires into closer harmony with the systems operating in the whole cosmos. For this we need a cosmic imagination. We need to be able to perceive the cosmos itself as an intricate, symmetrical, cunningly contrived, imaginative entity in which we can be as much at home as a character in a work of fiction It is now time for man to turn civilization in the direction of integration and away from alienation, to bring human life back into harmony with the universe (Fabulation and Metafiction 217).

This vision teaches us what the philosophy of

postmodernism could not: how to live heroically in an anarchic world, instead of allowing ourselves to be dehumanized by violence and obscenity.

Notes

¹ To do postmodernism justice when evaluating its premises and proposals, we must concede that it achieved what modern philosophy could not--postmodernism has proposed a solution, where modern philosophy could offer none, to the problem of how we are to survive in a world which is growing uninhabitable. Furthermore, to be fair to the postmodernists, we must admit that the problem is so complex that there is probably no solution that would be completely satisfactory: we find our world unbearably banal, yet unbearably threatening. We must contend with a stifling morality that deprives us of pleasure, with boredom we feel so intensely that it makes us desperate, with the threat, now grown commonplace, that our relations with loved ones will not last, with the spread of violence and terrorism as authority has collapsed, and, above all, with the threat that we will be annihilated by a nuclear war (Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism 39-40). As Irving Howe has documented, the complexity of our crisis overwhelmed modern thinkers, so that they did not even attempt to solve the problem ("The Culture of Modernism"). The modernist diagnosis was that our situation was hopeless: we might survive the ruination of our world, it told us, but we would never live through the aftermath of that catastrophe: anarchy, and terrorism. An anarchic world is not one we are prepared to cope with either physically or mentally: there, even those who managed to evade the terrorist would not escape harm, because they would

be injured psychologically by their exposure to atrocity. The works of Samuel Beckett portray this bleak modern prediction: in "Endgame" and "Waiting for Godot", he shows us a vision of man so terrorized and disgusted by absurdity and violence that he is no longer human.

Modernists have been justly criticized for their pessimistic and sometimes even masochistic response to the state of the world. Walter Kerr is critical of modern angst and of those who "quailed" before the void instead of "investigating it actively" (332). Marcus Klein says that the "easy nihilism" of the modernists is as bad as "bland hopefulness" (After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century 296). Raymond Olderman complains that modernists, giving in to despair, failed to realize "there is a real wonder about human life which needs to be incorporated along with the dark fears of impending doom" (220). Howe accuses the modernists of not only despair, but perversion: instead of rebelling against the wasteland, he says, they "learn[ed] to find comfort in their wounds", convincing themselves that it is "good, proper, and even beautiful that man should live in discomfort" (9).

Many have arrived at the same conclusion as the postmodernists, then--that we cannot afford to resign

ourselves to despair and nausea. John Hawkes, in an interview with John Keuhl, insists that we must not respond to our world with despair and horror, "given all we know about our terrifying, destructive possibilities," but must have "the courage needed to affirm human potential" (183).

2 I am indebted, in these reflections, to conversations with Dr. David Jeffrey.

3 I am indebted here to Dr. Jeffrey, with whom I discussed these ideas.

4 Anne Archer, in her article "Real Mummies," has observed that Thomas seems to be caught in a "vicious circle of self-reflection" (220).

5 Kroetsch made this comment at a reading at the University of Ottawa in March of 1985.

6 At the end of the section "The Karapothas" Ondaatje relates that he talked with Ian Goonetilleke about the Insurgency, describing Goonetilleke as "a man who knows

history is always present" (85). This makes Ondaatje's lack of historical perspective even more problematic.

7 Thomas told George Bowering in an interview that Africa is "only a metaphor" to her. "I think," she added, "that for other Canadian novelists it's a reality" (15).

8 In "Journeys to the Interior: The African Stories of Audrey Thomas" Wayne Grady has argued that Thomas' stories "--like all good travel stories--take place in a kind of unpoliticized mythical vacuum", (100). This may be true, but I am not sure we want to limit Thomas' work to the category of "good travel stories." Her African stories must also be seen as a response to postmodernism, and analyzed in that context, Grady's criterion does not apply.

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