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Charles Bruce: *The Channel Shore* between Realism and Nostalgia

In 1954 Charles Bruce published his only novel *The Channel Shore*, following seven years of writing and revising. A story chronicling the lives of three families over a period of thirty years, the book won praise from reviewers when it appeared, but then fell into almost complete obscurity for more than two decades. Only after *The Channel Shore* was reprinted by McClelland and Stewart in 1984 as a part of the New Canadian Library series, did readers and critics recognize the importance of the text as an example of regional realism. Since the novel's reappearance, critic John Moss has explored the text's "patterns of moral complexity" (178), Andrew Seaman has focused on the theme of "unity and salvation rooted in the ongoing process of community living" (30), while Andrew Wainwright has argued that Bruce "creates a timeless country" in which "time past" fuses with the present and future to generate a process of growth and fulfilment (242).

These initial explorations have brought to the forefront a number of Bruce's chief concerns, including his vision of the community and his sense of history. However, the assumptions which are embedded in the novel—the competing and contradictory ideologies which drive the narrative—have yet to be fully considered. *The Channel Shore* stands out among Maritime fictions for its carefully constructed balance between the conventions of realism and those of nostalgia; between a strong faith in the ideals of liberalism and historicism and an impulse towards a conservative idealism. While the traditions of realism govern the central plot and characters of the text, a strong nostalgic desire controls the novel's representation of contemporary events, the shifting vision of

women, and the development of the villain. If the resulting ideological patterns of the text are to be appreciated, attention needs to be paid to the various ways the narrative has been influenced by these traditions of realism, romance, and nostalgia, and consideration must be given to the ways the fiction reworks or excludes contemporary historical and social experience.¹

Of the many models which shape the structure of *The Channel Shore*, the most powerful are the conventions and assumptions of the realist aesthetic. On even a cursory examination of the text's stylistic features, *The Channel Shore's* adherence to realist conventions is evident. As in many nineteenth-century realist novels, Bruce's characters are located in physically detailed settings, precise accounts are given of time sequences, its multiple character focalizations are controlled by a single omniscient narrator, and once the style of the text establishes a "set register" it does not call attention to itself through self-reflexive gestures (Lucente 14-15). Similarly, the novel imitates the discourses of realism in its wealth of detailed physical descriptions. The text is packed with concrete details, which do not contribute to the "form of the signified i.e., narrative structure," but help create what Roland Barthes calls the "reality effect" (148). Through the external narrator's attentive eye the rural community is visualized with precision:

At the top of the hill the land levelled out. From there a person could look east and west along the northern fields and pastures of almost all the places at Currie Head, separated by line fences and untidy hedges of young wild apple trees the years had grown there. . . . You could look east across the fields and woods of Currie Head to the district of Katen's Rocks. Or let your sight drift out over the down-sloping fields and clusters of pitch-roofed farm buildings to the stretch of sea they called the Channel. (CS 12)

The recording of carefully observed physical details heightens the illusion that a "real" historical community is being described.

Realist conventions not only have a powerful influence on the general style of *The Channel Shore*, they also affect its deeper philosophic assumptions. Erich Auerbach and Georg Lukacs approach their studies of literature from very different perspectives, but both agree that the early realist novel is deeply aware of "the subsurface movement and the unfolding of historical forces," and attempts to create a credible portrait

of the world by ensuring that the events and characters of the narrative are embedded in specific social and historical settings. As the characters are grounded in a "time-conditioned dependency" (Auerbach 425), the protagonists begin to appear as distinct individuals capable of exercising their free will within the larger patterns of cause and effect. The "realistic" character thus becomes one who has the power of, and opportunity to use, his freedom, but at the same time is immersed in a specific cultural context. As Lukacs succinctly states, "the individual and the social historical are inseparably connected in regard to both characterization and action" (239).

In Bruce's fictional world these realist, historicist assumptions are adopted within a liberal belief that a stable, free individual exists within a clear social, sexual, cultural context, and that the writer can create independent characters whose "reality" depends on their immersion in and struggles against specific historical circumstances. These sentiments appear explicitly in the text through the reliable voice of Bill Graham, the visitor from the outside world. When Bill sees that Grant is trapped by a deterministic vision that threatens his family's happiness, he reminds him that peoples' actions through history are a blend of freedom and chance, saying: "Don't you think—well nobody's a copy of his father, good or bad. All kinds of things get scribbled in, from other people, other generations. Or edited out. You can't figure inheritance on a slide rule . . ." (CS 346). This balance of individual integrity and historical context is a central idea of the text, and eventually is a revelation for Grant.

The assumptions of individualism surface explicitly in the text during its rare didactic moments; however, the ideology is most strongly present as the driving force behind both the primary plot and the development of the characters. Except for the most negatively portrayed individual, Anse, the characters' lives and actions repeat a single pattern. Each character, whether it be a major figure like Grant or a minor presence like Eva McKee, slowly becomes aware that he or she is moulded by specific situations. They realize that they are part of a large web of cause and effect, that they are afflicted by negative social forces, and that an act of free will is required in order for them to escape their oppression and establish a healthy relationship with the community. If the characters follow this pattern through to its conclusion they move towards the positive end of the text's value system and are content. On the other hand, if characters refuse to accept that they are part of a larger system,

or attempt to obstruct those who seek to exercise their freedom, they inevitably meet with misfortune and unhappiness. The movement of the characters from an isolationist to an authentically communal perspective varies significantly according to the age, sex, and social position of each individual, but the overall pattern holds firm.

For Grant Marshall the journey from repression to a sense of freedom and pleasure in the community happens several times. "Part One" of *The Channel Shore* is set in "Summer-Fall 1919" and introduces us to Grant as a recently demobilized soldier who "reached Army age late and never got past England" (CS 28). Unaffected by the deep cynicism which followed the First World War, Grant returns home and is soon caught in a struggle between duty and love: a conflict between his sense of obligation to his puritanical uncle/guardian, James Marshall, and his romantic desire for a neighboring Catholic girl, Anna Gordon.

James is a "strait-laced and dry-footed" Methodist farmer who trusts only "hard work and careful figuring and virtue," and functions in the story as a domineering father figure who binds Grant's search for freedom with restrictive maxims (CS 29,57). Grant recognizes that his uncle is excessively controlling—especially when he is directed to "avoid meeting" Anna—but nonetheless he internalizes the norms of his rigid upbringing: "There was something in him, a streak of puritan denial, that would not permit a lapse into tenderness" (CS 106). In contrast, Anna Gordon, sister and antithesis of the villainous Anse, represents everything Grant needs in order to align himself with the ideals of liberalism. Described as "affectionate," "light hearted," and "laughing," Anna possesses a measure of independence which allows her to express herself freely to her friends and family even though "outward signs of affection were not in common fashion along the Channel Shore" (CS 27-29). Grant is drawn to Anna's humanity, but he is bound by James's "pride . . . iron kindness and sense of family," and cannot respond to her direct affection or explain his "knotted loyalty" (CS 108). Without alternative versions of his own past he is unable to free himself from his family context.

It is only after Anna leaves the shore and dies accidentally in Halifax, that Grant's world is shaken to the point that he begins his move towards independence. Having lost the object of his love, Grant breaks from James, moves into Josie and Stewart Gordon's home and immediately feels he has "reached a decision that made [him] a new man, gave [him] this sense of iron freedom" (CS 132). The narrator reinforces his growing

sense of integrity by making him the sole character focalizer for the last quarter of the first section. However, although the narrator notes that "at heart and for himself he feared nothing, cared nothing for what people thought and said," it would be a mistake to assume that Grant has transcended his past and found absolute security: that the text is moving towards a pattern of romance (CS 141-42). Grant has broken from his uncle but has not yet found within himself the qualities which will allow him to communicate with and comfort those around him. For example, after moving in with the Gordons he realizes that Josie is afflicted by grief and a "continuing iron calm," but he cannot find a way to comfort her.

The ability to approach Josie, and symbolically reestablish his relationship with the community, only emerges after Grant talks to Richard Mckee, the elderly fisherman/farmer. Richard is a character devoted to maintaining the skills and crafts of the past. He acts as a touchstone of historical continuity in the novel, and his ability to accept and preserve his past makes him both a beacon for the text's troubled characters, and an emblem of stable individuality: "[Coopering] was one of the out-of-date crafts that survived on the Shore in Richard because, now as always, there were times when he did what he liked" (CS 241). Meeting on the beach, Richard and Grant enter into a discussion about the past and Grant learns the stories about his father, Harvey, which James would never relate. By hearing tales about Harvey's pranks on a malevolent trapper and a domineering teacher, Grant receives the means of revising his own heritage to include more emotional responses:

And in this at last he saw the face and heard the laughter of Harvey Marshall. Harvey, a Marshall, touched by the thing that pulsed in the Grahams, the Curries, the Neills, the McKees. The thing that was not exactly warmth, not sentiment, not. . . . The thing was alive, that was not cold doctrine or property or measured pride, but simple feeling. (CS 160)

These revelations enable Grant to break his silence with Josie and he learns that her grief does not come from her daughter's death, but from the love affair of her son, Anse with Hazel McKee, and the resulting shameful pregnancy. In his desire to heal the wounds of the community he cares for, Grant—in the last ten pages of the first section—decides to go to Toronto and marry Hazel. Later in the novel, after Alan has been born and Hazel has died, Grant recalls how he experienced a sense of

freedom and a reaffirmation of his bond with humanity through his marriage: "In the end we both learned something. Not a damn thing matters but what people can do for each other when they're up against it" (CS 208). His passage from a state of repression to one of freedom is not achieved once and for all, for Grant repeatedly struggles to keep his balance in the subsequent chapters.

The second and third sections take on the characteristics of the *bildungsroman*, as we watch Hazel's son Alan mature through adolescence and young manhood; however, Grant's struggle for security continues to function as a subplot. Having founded his relationship with his adopted son on the illusion that Alan is his biological son, Grant repeatedly subjects himself to restrictive fears that someday the truth will be discovered. He attempts to bury the truth, first by trying to send the boy away to a boarding school where he will be safe from local gossip, and, in the final section, by refusing to reveal the truth of Alan's parentage from fear that their emotional bonds will vanish. Only as Alan matures and learns to assert his own will is Grant released from his burdens and returned to the "kind of easy freedom and [the] gradual relaxed excitement" which this text often uses to signal a character's emergence as a secure and mature individual (CS 268). Significantly, it is Richard, the actant who best represents the text's ideals, who observes Grant's final release from fear when Alan publicly rejects Anse: "Richard had seen his stillness change, the subtle flow of expression. What was it? Still controlled, still hard, but at ease. Lively with something like elation" (CS 391).

In the novel's sympathetic portrayal of Grant we find one of the text's strongest representations of its ideology about the power of personal freedom and the importance of the individual's integration into his or her social context. While the word "freedom" is repeatedly stressed in the novel a definition of the concept is not given, and the narrator assumes that the audience will draw from its own late nineteenth, early twentieth, century background to interpret the term. Though unspecified, the word refers neither to a religious free will bound within a larger system of divine providence nor to a political ideal of freedom within an equality of condition. Rather the term draws on the traditions of liberalism which assert that an individual has the "liberty" to determine his/her own physical, emotional, and spiritual state, within the secure confines of a social system (Horowitz 143-47). In *Technology and Empire*, George

Grant expands on this definition asserting that "liberalism [is] a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumptions that man's essence is his freedom and therefore what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it" (Grant 114). Though underdefined, the ideals of freedom and community participation are ultimately transmitted through the text without a trace of irony. The liberal ideology is further reinforced in the characterizations of Alan, Josie and Eva.

The second and third parts of the novel, set in the winter of 1933-34 and the summer of 1946 respectively, concentrate primarily on Alan's attempts to establish his identity. As the offspring of the rebellion of Anse Gordon and Hazel Mckee, but raised by Grant as his biological son, Alan spends his thirteenth Christmas trying to unearth his true parentage, and, much later, his first summer after the war trying to find a way to tell Grant he knows about his origins. Both undertakings involve a struggle to establish and then assert his own identity while remaining an integral part of the family and community. Alan's emergence as the most frequent internal focalizer in the second half of the novel reflects the text's interest in exploring an individual's search for freedom, rather than in dwelling on Grant's struggle to maintain a tenuous liberty.

From the beginning of the second section, the text confirms that Alan is embedded and acts within a particular personal and social context. As a youth he consciously models himself after his adoptive father, wanting to walk the woods, cut out the roads, and "peel pulpwood": "sharing a man's work, Grant's work, a known enterprise on the Channel Shore" (CS 182-84). Other community members, such as Richard and Josie, also have an impact on his personality, feeding his interest in the history of the Shore. Even the dead resonate in his behavior: after returning from the war he goes for a swim in the Black Brook, just as his mother had twenty-six years earlier (CS 329); and at the final picnic scene he befriends the local outcast boy, just as his natural aunt, Anna, had included the young Tarsh Murphy in the picnic games long before his birth (CS 377). These echoes of the past confirm that Alan is constructed as a member of a larger society.

Alan is driven towards independence and towards the exploration of his origins by a need to understand why Grant has broken their habit of open communication, having decided unilaterally that Alan is to go away to finish his schooling (CS 183). As the narrative describes Alan's quest, he repeats a single phrase four times. The phrase, placed in italics by

Bruce, resonates beyond Alan's life and echoes the text's central concern that each person be given the opportunity to determine his or her own path: "*He never asked me if I want to go. He just said I'm going*" (CS 219, 234, 261, 267). Grant's desire for "iron freedom" drove the plot of the first section, and Alan's resolution to make his own desires known governs the events of the second.

The desire to choose one's own path makes Alan start his search, but it is only a part of the support that is needed before he can confront his adoptive father. In order to assert himself, Alan must first learn to rewrite his past, and reevaluate his relationships with others. Once again the hero visits "helpers" who act as reservoirs of the Shore's history. A visit with Richard, his maternal grandfather, exposes Alan to a photograph of Anse Gordon which was among the possessions of his mother; a snapshot which prompts his stepsister, Margaret, to ask the provocative questions: "Mrs. Josie—the Gordons, What's she got to do—Are they any relation? To us?" (CS 245) Richard says little in this section, but his preservation of the past has given Alan his first solid clue to understanding his heritage. Armed with a few hints, Alan goes to Josie the next evening and confirms the "facts" of his parentage and the "truth" about Grant's love for him.

Having rewritten his history, Alan has the information he needs to assert his autonomy, but lacks the motivation to confront his father. Just as Grant was motivated to take his final step towards freedom-through-marriage by his sensitivity to Josie's shame and the community's need, so in both sections Alan's determination to act is solidified only when he realizes that the happiness of others is also at stake. On the morning of New Year's Day, 1934, Alan finds the necessary sense of conviction after Margaret reveals how much she wants him to stay: "She threw herself across him, burying her face in his sweater with a exclamation oddly wild with relief, crying without restraint"(CS 265). Able to act on behalf of someone beyond himself, Alan goes directly to Grant and with a voice "roughened by the resolution that had come to him with Margaret in his arms," declares, "I don't want to go to Halifax Academy in the fall either. I want to work here in the woods, with you; and take grade ten right here, from Renie" (CS 267).

The same pattern unfolds at the end of the third section. Throughout this final part Alan struggles with time, trying to find the right moment to make his origins public without hurting Grant, or alienating himself

from the people of the shore. The appropriate time comes when Anse insults the entire community, calling them, "A bunch of farmers. Sheep manure and sawdust . . ." and then crudely refers to his abandonment of Hazel and Alan: "If I'd known I'd planted a crop here, I'd have stayed to watch it grow" (CS 388). The episode is structured so that Alan is able to act on behalf of both the citizens and himself, reinforcing the ideal that independence and individuality must be established in cooperation with the interests of the larger community.

Alan's personal struggles are presented within the liberal historicist framework characteristic of Bruce's realism; however it must be noted that a strong element of the romance tradition colors his relationship with Margaret. "Lan's" and "Mag's" relationship first appears as a normal, if affectionate, sibling alliance, but as they age their fondness blossoms into love. When they embrace before Alan confronts Grant, and later after the Forester's Pond dance in the third section, the text slips into the diction of romance: on both occasions they are caught up in "an exclamation oddly wild" (CS 265) and a "wild wanting excitement" (CS 298). The text displays considerable anxiety about the incestuous overtones of their attraction. The narration meticulously documents how each one suspects and confirms that they are not really related by blood, before they are allowed to evolve into a romantic couple. But if the text is able to avoid the spectre of incest, it cannot avoid the oddly artificial patterns of the traditional love story. The way their mutual attraction seems to be guided by fate and destiny, their time of ritual separation and loneliness during the war, and the text's celebration of their eventual marriage, all signal that the realistic account of Alan's maturation has a strong romantic subtext.

If Alan embodies a mix of realist and romance traditions, the minor characters of *The Channel Shore* reflect the powerful realist assumption that individuals must be seen to operate in specific historical moments. However, not all the characters who achieve a measure of freedom and reconnect themselves with the broader community have to take such dramatic steps as Grant and Alan. In the first section of the novel Josie Gordon is described as an "ingrowing woman," unable to lay "bare her heart" to others or overcome her grief about Anse's rebellions. Hazel's example of openness and vulnerability is a "definite turning-point" which allows Josie to free herself from her pride, embrace Grant's family, and experience a "slow recovery, the achievement of a tranquillity that was

inward as well as outward. . ." (CS 223). Governed by pride and fear of community opinion, Eva Mckee is another individual who is so worried that her daughter's romance with Anse will result in "getting yourself talked about", that she cannot address Hazel's deeper need for independence. Only when she sees Hazel on her deathbed, does Eva confront her "pride" (CS 240), and begin to integrate her own life with Grant's young family: "in some manner the years had turned the tone's edge . . . the eyes had learned to smile" (CS 239). The actions of the minor characters in the text reinforce its dominant ideology about individual freedom in the social and communal context.

While characters aligned with the central vision of the text ascend towards peace, those who block the freedom of others or pursue their own interests regardless of its social impact, become increasing unhappy. Hat Wilmot is the local gossip, whose "edge of malice" complicates rather than facilitates other people's search for independence. Near the novel's conclusion, the narrator portrays her as a ridiculous figure comically asking how a sailboat moves: "You mean that's all there is to it? The wind pushes it along?" (CS 380). James Marshall is another example of an almost villainous character who resists the ideals of the text. James distrusts "casualness, laughter, garrulity wherever they were found", drives Grant from his life, and in the second section we see him reduced to a bitter old man who "argues with God" (CS 248). Though the circumstances of Alan's birth prove to be the salvation of several families, the boy's face only reminds James of his lost "health and strength and the bitterest defeat he had ever known" (CS 250). After the text's last encounter with the aged and rancorous James in the second section, he disappears from the novel with hardly a postscript.

The personalities of the characters and the events of their lives appear realistic to the audience because they are constructed within an ideology of the "free" individual's relations with historical and social contexts, which is familiar and true to many contemporary readers. The technique of creating webs of cause and effect in which characters are embedded is, as Auerbach and Lukacs note, a convention more than a hundred and fifty years old, and yet it still has the power to affect audiences despite the persistent interrogation of postmodernists and poststructuralists. However, the ideals of individual liberty and a faith in a "realistic" perception of the world are not the only assumptions operating in this text. The text's faith

in personal freedom and historical context sometimes comes into contact with the powerful nostalgic impulses of the novel.

Charles Bruce disliked the term "nostalgia," calling it the "silliest word in the English language" (Wainwright 122), but there is nonetheless a strong strain of "homesickness" which runs through Bruce's life and his fictions. What makes this text particularly interesting is the balance which emerges as the conservative idealism characteristic of nostalgia meets with the liberalism and historicism typical of the novel's realism. The text's longing for an ideal past governs how certain occurrences external to the life of the Shore are represented, affects the portrayal of the female characters, and finally is responsible for the construction of the novel's darkest character: Anse Gordon.

The idealistic impulse can first be felt in the way the text subtly under-represents places and experiences external to the life of the Shore. For example, the narrative's few references to contemporary experience tend to be very selective. Bruce is careful to record the impact of modern technology on the Shore including the demise of the sailboat, the arrival of Grant's portable diesel sawmill, and the use of cars and trucks. However, there is little reference to the larger economic and political forces which affected Maritime life. Many of the hardships endured by Maritimers in the twentieth century are erased or veiled in order to preserve the nostalgic impulse and reinforce the largely middle-class perspective of the novel. This reinscription of the past for specific ideological purposes can be seen in the text's representation of the Depression, and its account of the region's long-term historical development.

The second section of the novel is set in 1933-34, and the only mention of the Depression which had plagued the east coast since the early 1921 is Alan's observation that "Lumber's pretty low" (CS 203). No references are made to the fact that between 1920 and 1922 wood prices dropped 30%, lumber markets were flooded with wood from British Columbia, employment in mills dropped 50%, and that these hardships continued until the Depression ended in 1939 (Forbes 28-66). Far removed from the economic collapse of the region, Grant is presented as a prospering entrepreneur who can "take the old stuff, the country that's all around your feet . . . and build something they said you couldn't . . . something really new" (CS 269). When Grant does create a mill industry, it represents a smooth fusion of innovative energy and

traditional values: the mill is integrated into the rhythms of the agrarian life and the saws shut down when it is time to mow the hay (*CS* 277). Similarly, the collapse of the local fishing industry is not depicted as the result of a 50% drop in salt cod prices and the creation of a fresh and frozen fish industry which was centralized in three or four major centres like Halifax and Lunenburg (Brym 130-40); it is the result of a natural decline in fish stocks. Although Nova Scotia had an unemployment rate of 19.6% during the 1930s and a large proportion of the population required some form of financial assistance, the only character who seems to suffer monetarily is Vangie Murphy and her hardships, as we shall see are presented as self-imposed. Even the massive emigration of nearly 300,000 people from the Maritimes during the thirties is represented in a veiled fashion by Joe McKee's journey out to Peace River, Alberta, where he is mysteriously unaffected by the dust bowl years.

If the Nova Scotian experiences of the Depression are transformed by the text, so is the province's long history. *The Channel Shore* is a novel intent on reconnecting the reader with a sense of the past, a heritage. Early in the first section the narrator recounts the local history, recalling "one golden period, the forty or fifty middle years of the [nineteenth] century . . . [when the Shore] prospered on the basic economics of salt fish, enhanced by . . . vessel-building and coastal trade, cattle and sheep, and squared hardwood timber" (*CS* 12-13). The narrator notes that such prosperity has long since passed, but does not explore the political reasons for the area's chronic underdevelopment and unemployment. Instead of examining the larger national contexts of the region's recession, such as the change in preferential freight rates for the Maritimes, or the chronic problems with development capital, the narrator simply says that the economy failed because it was "based on circumstances that were not to last" (*CS* 13). Margaret goes even further when she suggests that the old prosperity and skills were never really lost, but were organically transformed into newer, economic models:

And people still lived on the Channel Shore, people with other skills, newer crafts, that somehow were related to and grew from the old. The story of the Shore was the story of a strange fertility. A fertility of flesh and blood that sent its seed blowing across continents of space on the winds of time, and yet was rooted here in home soil, renewed and re-renewed. (*CS* 353)

To note the many ways that Maritime experiences are reinscribed in the text is not to suggest the novel somehow fails to obey the historicist impulse to establish a proper context or produce a "true" portrait of the region. Rather, it reveals that, through selective representation and careful exclusion of contemporary experience, the narrative is able to create an apparently realistic setting while retaining an idealism reminiscent of the nineteenth century's faith in the inevitability of progress.²

Just as the text's nostalgic impulse influences its representation of the Shore and its history, so it affects the narrative's sexual assumptions and its representation of women. Most of the novel's ideological vision is manifested in what the text says and does. In its plot and character development, a commitment to liberalism and individual freedom can be discerned. (Both plots are driven by the search of Grant and Alan for independence within the structure of the community.) The pastoral and elegiac passages make apparent a longing for the idyllic past. However, some aspects of the text's ideology are not visible until we examine those things the text resists saying and about which the narrative remains silent. When these moments of repression are examined, the narrative's male-centred perspective and its link to nostalgia becomes more evident.

Unlike Bruce's collection of short stories, *The Township of Time*, and much of the fiction of Thomas Raddall and Ernest Buckler, *The Channel Shore* does not rely on sexual stereotypes to develop its female characters. Indeed, many of his representations of women initially appear to lack any nostalgic aura and work within the traditions of historical realism. Hazel, Margaret, Renie, and Josie fit the traditional moulds of wayward woman, young lover, wife, and matron respectively, but they also develop beyond these confining roles and the text does not suggest that their subordinate station in life is agreeable, necessary, or natural. For example, Grant's patriarchal practice of limiting the women's opportunities to work with him outside the home is carefully criticized. While Grant and Alan help old Frank and Dan Graham bring in the hay, Renie must stay behind and pick strawberries. The narrator records her dissatisfaction and notes her anger as she explains the situation to Bill:

Renie felt a small resentment at being out of it. As a girl on Prince's Island she had handled a fork, stowing away, and a rake behind the rack, raking after. But now Grant wouldn't let either her or Margaret take a

hand. . . . "They won't let me make hay. So I left them to stew in their own sweat." (CS 336)

Similarly, the fact that Margaret is once again allowed to help Alan and Buff Katen work in "Josie Gordon's hayfield" is one of the signs at the novel's conclusion that the emerging society is an improvement over the past (CS 393).

The text also historicizes sexual roles and demonstrates that in some cases, the "progress" of technology in the twentieth century has limited rather than liberated the women of the Shore. In her book *The New Day Recalled*, Veronica Strong Boag notes that while mechanization made some labor easier, it also isolated women from traditional work groups and further curtailed their lives outside the home (133-37). Bruce records the negative effects of the industrial age on the Channel Shore by having Josie remember, with some fondness, the "rough" life of earlier days when she "used to help father with the fish"; and by having Richard recall an earlier time when women were able to work with the men in the fields:

Years ago hay-making had been a month-long job at which everyone worked, men and boys with hand-scythes and pitchforks, women with forks shaking out the heavy green swaths, turning the spread hay to the sun, raking-after behind the loaded racks. Now horse-drawn mowing machines and rakers were getting common. A farm could be made in a fortnight or less and it was becoming unusual to see a woman in the field. (CS 55)

By recording the shifts in work habits through history, the text affirms that confining sex roles are socially constructed, not universal and natural.

Yet if Bruce is able to go further than either Raddall or Buckler in producing non-stereotypical female characters, his text does not, in the end, avoid inscribing a male-centred perspective of the world, through its nostalgic desire to maintain the ideal character of the community. This male-centred vision comes to the foreground in several ways. The confinement of women within the house is questioned when a passage is being focalized through a character like Renie, but the narrator is not as sensitive and rarely questions the privileged access males have to such "outside" economic spaces as the woods, the fishing ponds, and the fish huts. Margaret's wish not "to intrude in the man-world" of Richard's tool

shed is presented as a natural courtesy, and not a mark of the shore's constructed division of labor (CS 244). At other times the narrative seems to make a point of defending the economic hegemony of men. Renie is the local schoolteacher but the external narrator twice stresses that her work is "an incidental filling-out of life" (CS 196, 219), and that she does her job "not for a living, but as a person who lived in the place, helping out because teachers were hard to get" (CS 187). Affirming that Renie's true calling is to fulfil her nurturing instinct and that her "happiness was in the people who were hers," the narrator takes unusual measures to ensure that she is not perceived as a threat to Grant's dominance (CS 191).

At a deeper level, the nostalgia of the text creates an ideological blind spot around the deeper systemic sexism which pervades the rural community. According to the dominant ideology each character is grounded in a specific context which, though it dictates the general conditions of life, still allows a measure of autonomy. Grant and Alan are both able to determine their own ends, but the constraints of the social structure are more restrictive for the women. Hazel McKee wants to break away from her mother's repressive attitudes, but she recognizes that as a woman her options are narrow:

She would have liked to be a singer. . . . But it wasn't practical. . . . No. You stayed on the Channel Shore to work and marry. Or you got away from it to go into household service—but that was beneath a McKee. Or to do stenography or teach school. Not to sing. (CS 10)

The text accurately reflects the historic limitations placed on women and records that Hazel's sexual relationship with Anse is a "private rebellion" against her lack of opportunities for freedom, but it does not explore the larger implications of her search for "a secret dark independence" (CS 24). After presenting Hazel's pregnancy as a result of a woman's desire for freedom in a repressive society, the text does not return to examine the issue. When the pregnancy is discovered, Hazel's fear, Josie's shame, and the community's disapproval are communicated by the narrator as a natural consequence of violating the moral code. Some characters like Josie are uneasy about the darker strands of selfishness which run through the shore, but as a rule the narrator does not focus on the rigidity of the community and its contribution to Hazel's "fall". In this silence—

generated as the narrator attempts to maintain a romantic vision of the rural world—the patriarchal perspective of the text is unveiled.

Vangie Murphy is another female character whose sexual rebellion crosses the narrow limits prescribed by society. Again the narrator hints that the strict social taboos against premarital sex and illegitimate children are partly responsible for Vangie's miserable life, but in the end the social order is absolved as the narrator reveals that Vangie actually prefers her life of isolation and poverty: "She would have admitted to herself, had the thought occurred to her, that she liked best the role of road-walking sloven. . . . On the road there was a hint of the carelessness, the freedom, that had coloured her younger days with a harsh excitement" (*CS* 226). By confirming that Vangie has chosen her own life of poverty, the text is able to marginalize her from the social order, and suggest that she is an anomaly in an otherwise idyllic community.

In *The Channel Shore* the nostalgic impulse often operates at a slight distance from the realist conventions governing the heart of the text. Concentrated in the language of the external narrator and in the representation of the region, Bruce's conservative idealism is a pervasive part of the ideological conditions of the novel, but may seem limited in its power over the central characters and actions of the plot. When we consider the text's most disruptive character, Anse Gordon, however, it is apparent that the text is deeply troubled by the implications of his corrupt nature. For a novel embedded in liberalism and historicism—committed to tracing the social context from which the various personalities emerge—the job of explaining the origins of a "villain" can be very difficult. If it followed its normal pattern of "realistic" character development, the text would have to account for Anse's malicious essence by tracing a dark line of cause and effect through the community's history. While tracing a villain's origins may not threaten a realist narrative, it certainly disturbs an idealistic text. In order to avoid creating such a dark heritage in his beloved community, the author uses the conventions of romance to construct the novel's most menacing figure, so as to distance him from the nostalgic ideals of the text. The emergence of Anse as an emblem of evil to be expelled, rather than a three-dimensional character who must be integrated into the community, is an indication that the conservative nostalgic subtext stretches from the margins to the very core of the text's "realistic" action.

From Anse's first appearance in the novel, the narrator makes it clear that he is to be distrusted and disliked. When Bill meets him in 1945 at a London garden party for prisoners of war, Anse is described as: "thin, dark, no longer young, but stamped with [the] qualities [of] . . . self-possession, a private arrogance, a slight continuing contempt" (CS 2). In a novel that resists putting its characters into moral categories, Anse is an intensely codified individual and becomes a one-dimensional ruffian very much like the vice figure from a morality play. He is present in less than a third of the text; however, in that short time he is recorded as being "sardonic" twice (311, 383), possessed by "contemptuous malice" once (381), "touched with mockery" six times (2, 312, 314, 323, 327, 388), and moved by "contempt" six times (2, 14, 17, 42, 355, 388). Even Anse sees himself as "the wild one" who violates both his parents' wishes and the community's norms by "[leaving] home, telling no one of his going . . . [making] a midnight bonfire of James Marshall's backhouse . . . and [chopping] Fred Marshall down with his fists, on the road one Sunday night" (CS 18).

Anse Gordon is a figure created outside the conventions of realism. This is confirmed by the text's refusal to explore the origins of his cynicism and rebellion. Though every character in the novel follows the realist tradition and is developed within a specific context which explains their behaviors in relation to their past, there are no similar explorations of Anse. Josie cannot understand her son and recognizes only that there is a mysterious quality in him which sets him apart from others: "something in Anse you couldn't reach. . . . Something unreachable." She refers to him as "the dark first child of their marriage," as if his sullen character was predetermined from birth (CS 49). That his behavior has no prescient is confirmed by Stewart who thinks of Anse while mourning Anna's sudden death, and says, "Queer, y'know. Not his fault. . . . It's what you're born with. Restless . . ." (CS 135). Stewart is attempting to justify Anse's neglect, but there is more than a grain of truth in his analysis of his son. Anse stands alone on the Shore as a character who has no discernible heritage and leaves no tangible legacy. By constructing him as an enigmatic rogue figure from the romance tradition, the text is able to introduce a source of conflict into the narrative while defending its nostalgic impulse to idealize the community.

Anse is not motivated by any historical force recognized by the text, but that does not mean his actions must be capricious or incomprehen-

sible. He cannot be propelled by the forces of his past, so instead this romance villain is driven, like many modernist figures (such as David Canaan in Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*), by his need to secure a solid image of himself. The novel's heroes, Grant and Alan, have a clear sense of who they are, and they struggle only for the freedom to declare that identity openly. Anse, by contrast, is a split subject, secure only when his self-image is being reflected back to him by an outraged or fearful community. When Anse appears in the first chapter as a returning soldier from the First World War, he searches for a sign that would confirm his sense of self-importance—"the evidence to himself of the power he was" (CS 15)—and finds his external confirmation in his seduction of Hazel Mckee. Because Anse relies on the community's reaction to establish himself as a coherent individual, Hazel's humiliating public rejection of him destroys his self-image. Unable to bear seeing "the fact of belonging to Anse Gordon held worthless and disavowed. . . ." Anse retreats into an embarrassed self-exile. When he returns to the Channel Shore after a twenty-six-year absence, he resumes his role as a romantic villain in modernist guise and anticipates the reception he will receive from his suspicious neighbors: "There wasn't one of them, not one, who wouldn't stop when they met him on the road, recognizing, for all their holiness, the flare of something special. And all of them a little envious. Envious and cautious" (CS 315). As his plans to secure a position in the Shore's eyes as Alan's true father collapse, Anse is again confronted by the fact that he is "Powerless." When he lashes out against the community, he is ritually expelled from the society's borders. Once again, Richard, the character most securely embedded in the culture of the Shore, is the focalizer chosen to announce Anse's departure: "he thought he could hear the creak of gear, the slight whisper of canvas, from the anchorage where Anse Gordon's boat was moored. It would be like Anse, to take this way of going . . ." (CS 391).

In the end, the text cannot accept a figure like Anse. As a spectre of tyranny and rebellion he is too disruptive to be allowed into in a textual world that values free will and affirmation. In addition, the text's careful balance of realism and nostalgia, of liberalism's celebration of the individual and a conservative faith in the community, is threatened by Anse's appearance as a figure from the modern world. Touched with irony, disillusioned with tradition, and trapped in a search for identity, Anse represents what the novel is least able to accept: the self-destructive

cynicism which is part of the postwar psyche. The expulsion of Anse accomplishes more than the resolution of Grant's family problems. It secures the text's double desire to represent the Channel Shore as a place of individual freedom and community involvement, and as an idyllic region where traditional values can still withstand some of the negative aspects of the twentieth century. Through the construction of Anse and his final absence, the nostalgic impulse joins with the realist conventions to govern the centre of the novel.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank John Lennox, Len Early, Ian Sowtan, and the anonymous reviewers of the *Dalhousie Review* for their perceptive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests that Bruce's nineteenth-century mentality is also indicated by "his concern for a knowable community, his belief that . . . 'there were still people you must meet and talk to, relationships you had to make, customs you had to follow' (CS 149)" (60-61).

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