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Patterns of Transposition: a Comparison of Pastoral and Urban Settings in Frederick Philip Grove's "Snow" and Ethel Wilson's "The Window"

During the 20th century, predominant patterns of habitation in Canada shifted from rural to urban settings. In 1901, an estimated sixty-three per cent of Canadians lived in rural communities; at present, the same statistic accounts for less than one-quarter of the population (Wilson-Smith 2). In Canadian literature, a corresponding shift can be seen in fictional settings; and transitions from pastoral to urban settings have been associated with new themes and archetypes (e.g. Waterston 151), as well as a revised approach to realism (New 156). However, given that this country's perceived literary identity itself has been shaped by a deep and abiding contact with nature, it is interesting to question the extent to which a shift to urban settings automatically marks 'new ground' in Canadian fiction. I would suggest that such a development should not *necessarily* be characterized as one of marked progression or transformation. Neither should the urban environment necessarily be conceived of as constituting a new category in Canadian fiction. In particular, Frederick Philip Grove and Ethel Wilson, in their respective fictional works "Snow" and "The Window", demonstrate how one contrast between pastoral and urban settings might be best characterized as one of *transposition* rather than transformation.

The meaning of the term ‘transposition’ should first be clarified in the present context. I propose for purposes of this essay to define ‘transposition’ as a systematic mapping between two compatible systems—for example, a mapping from physical to social space. The mapping is typically not isomorphic, and it can entail both increases and reductions in the fidelity of particular attributes of interest—that is, the process of transposition may have either an enriching or an impoverishing effect on the literary content. Grove’s “Snow” and Wilson’s “The Window” share several notable commonalities that make them amenable to a comparison along the proposed lines. Both authors are immigrant writers whose works are invested in the realistic depiction of the life and struggle of a solitary figure. Both narratives portray settings in which their respective authors have actually taken up residence. Further to these commonalities, my intention is to demonstrate continuity—mediated by a process of transposition—in terms of themes, moods, tensions, and conceptions that are related to Grove and Wilson’s literary pastoral and urban settings.

Grove and Wilson, in their respective narratives, express didactic imperatives that are related both to their individual settings as well as to each other by virtue of what I am referring to as an *intermediary transpositional process*. In his critical account of Canadian literature <u>Patterns of Isolation</u>, John Moss develops the idea of a *geophysical imagination*—a condition of the creative conscious that springs from contact with the landscape (Moss 109). Moss proposes that “those patterns of isolation in our fiction which are shaped by the geophysical landscape are essentially moral” (110), and later

underscores this idea when he observes, "the vision of man in a natural world is a moral vision" (122). By way of example, Moss explains that Grove "defines a larger moral vision of mankind confronted by the cosmic machinery of his environment" (122). In "Snow," Grove's 'moral vision' appears to take the form of a noble struggle between nature and its human inhabitants. The protagonist in "Snow" (ostensibly Grove himself) models a willingness to participate in this struggle: in scaling a particularly high snowdrift on his way to the school he remarks, "I did my work, of course, as if nothing oppressed me" (Grove 256). Furthermore, it is evident that, in Grove's view, people are not meant to undermine nature's authority; rather, their role is to conform to its will. In selecting a course at one point along his drive home, the protagonist states, "[l]ike the snow I obeyed the laws of nature" (262). Both of these didactic imperatives are undoubtedly related to, and informed by, the landscape.

In sharp contrast to his view of fictional works that are set in a pastoral context, Moss argues that "the urban experience…almost by definition precludes the intimacy between man and the natural world essential for the revelation of a moral design" (Moss 110). For Moss, the qualities of urban environment mitigate the effects of the geophysical imagination. Moss's assertion here is certainly a reasonable one, and I do not mean to criticize it wholly, but rather to point out an exception: urban environments that are related to pastoral counterparts by virtue of a process such as transposition may well exhibit elements of a geophysical imagination. In "The Window," Wilson's characterization of a moral imperative is no less manifest than that of Grove's; it is also tied to the geophysical presence that comes, through his window, to Wilson's main

protagonist, Mr. Willy. Like the inhabitants in Grove's pastoral landscape, Mr. Willy is bound to a kind of work—a noble struggle—only this work has been transposed into a relational context; here, it is Mr. Willy's duty to establish and maintain meaningful social contact—both with his peers and perhaps even with a personal God. Wilson explains that in the evening Mr. Willy's window, "which was not illusion, only the purveyor of illusion…became a mirror which reflected against the blackness every detail of the shallow living-room" (330). Wilson seems to suggest that the mirror remains committed to the purveyance of illusion—only now the illusion is constituted by Mr. Willy's external pretense as a successful, secure, and "contented" (328) old man. Upon inspecting the reflection, Mr. Willy finally admits "that the arid feeling which he had so often experienced lately was probably what is called loneliness" (330). Of significance here is the fact that the fading of the Northern Lights, a prominent aspect of the geophysical presence seen through his window, had formerly left Mr. Willy "feeling small and alone" (328). His imagination drifts to "that area where there might be some meaning in creation which Mr. Willy supposed must be the place where some people seem to find a God, and perhaps a personal God at that" (330). At the end of the narrative, Mr. Willy considers the task of establishing contact with this unknown reality, and recognizes that "before him lay the hardest work of his life…[h]e must in some way and very soon break the great wall that shut him off from whatever light there might be" (335). Wilson presents a didactic imperative in "The Window" that, while related to—and situated in—an urban context, is yet linked to the pastoral counterpart in Grove's narrative by virtue of being (at least partially) a product of what Moss has called the geophysical imagination.

Having discussed the possibility of moral imperatives in Grove's "Snow" and Wilson's "The Window" that are interrelated by a process of transposition, I wish now to consider how particular obstacles to those imperatives are similarly mediated. Desmond Pacey, in his review of Canadian fiction from 1920-1940 that appeared in <u>The Literary History of Canada</u>, notes that Grove's narratives "portray man in conflict with a forbidding land and a forbidding climate, in conflict with his own inchoate impulses…and in conflict always with time which quickly eats away that which he builds" (Pacey 628). These dimensions of conflict are plainly manifested in "Snow", the harsh environment perhaps chief among them. Grove recounts that "there was an impression of barren, wild, bitter-cold windiness about the aspect that did not fail to awe my mind; it looked inhospitable, merciless, and cruelly playful" (Grove 259). One of the more notable characteristics of Grove's landscape is its imagined mocking tone. At times, this tone is perceived in association with some ironic aspect of the landscape—a massive snowdrift guarding a smooth and flat pass "looked like mockery" (270). On other occasions, this imagined tone seems more likely to be an artifact of the protagonist's emotional state. Upon stopping to water his horses at the 'half way farms', Grove's observation that "there was not a soul to be seen…no doubt everybody preferred the neighborhood of the fire to the cold outside" seems to be linked to his sense that "there was something relentless, inexorable, cruel, yes, something of a sneer in the pitiless way in which [the sun] looked down on the infertile waste around" (263). At several points throughout the narrative, Grove is so impressed by the physical characteristics of the landscape that he conceives of them as almost impassible. He describes "a seemingly impregnable bulwark" (263),

and later “a gigantic barricade” (268) that stand in his way. Although neither of these obstacles prove to be physically insurmountable, their initial effects on the protagonist’s psyche nearly undermine his ability to carry on the struggle with nature—that is, they threaten Grove’s moral imperative.

The physical and mental obstacles that have impeded Grove’s protagonist in “Snow” are largely present, though in an altered form, in Wilson’s “The Window”. One prominent example is that of a mocking voice that casts aspersions on the substance and meaning of Mr. Willy’s present life. The ‘spectre’—really Mr. Willy’s own “vague regrets”—communicates a sense of worthlessness (328), and articulates a hopeless outlook (329). Transposed into a psychological domain, this phenomenon (unlike Grove’s cruel sun) has no real form—it falls to pieces when looked upon (329)—and yet it is often localized within a specific physical context: “The spectre was not always present at [Gerald Waldo’s] parties but sometimes awaited him at home and said these things” (329). Additionally, there is the narrative’s final obstacle— “a solid almost visible wall of concrete or granite, set up between him and religious belief” (331)—through which Mr. Willy must ultimately break. Similar to those physical impediments described by Grove in “Snow” (though here again transposed into a psychological context) it is Mr. Willy’s estimation of the task at hand—of whether it is really possible to break through the ‘great stone wall’, “he knew how high, but not how thick” (333)—that threatens most his ability to accomplish the work at hand. In this respect, the obstructions that challenge Wilson’s didactic imperative in “The Window” may be viewed as transpositions of those that appear in the pastoral context of Grove’s “Snow”.

In summary, both “Snow” and “The Window” exhibit a didactic imperative, as well as obstacles that threaten those imperatives, which are linked to their respective environments and related to each other by a process of transposition. A final means by which the two narratives may be compared with respect to their depiction of pastoral and urban settings concerns the authors’ respective representations of place *per se*.

Moss highlights the special function of rural communities within the context of his discussion of a geophysical imagination, noting that “[t]he writers of Canadian fiction who confront nature directly of necessity retreat to the interpersonal configurations of rural communities where the impact of the surrounding environment is dissipated to analogical proportions, without losing its authenticity as an imminent presence” (Moss 111). Grove’s representation of rural locals in “Snow” conforms to Moss’ characterization of their role as sanctuaries which grant temporary reprieve from, and allow characters to gain clearer perspective of their response to, a harsh natural landscape. Grove’s protagonist takes advantage of the rural community where he works as a schoolmaster. Here he acquires the necessary materials for his journey, and a visit with friends offers him comfort (Grove 256) and a chance to prepare mentally for the task ahead of him.

My perspective on how Wilson has represented her urban environment in “The Window” is largely informed by Blanche Gelfant’s essay, “Ethel Wilson’s Absent City: A Personal View of Vancouver,” * and I would like briefly to summarize her findings. For Gelfant,

the most prominent feature of Wilson's Vancouver is its "strange absence": "This is not to say that Wilson's city lacks clearly identified places set within an accurate map of streets and shops…but whether it creates an urgent urban presence seems to me questionable" (Gelfant 11-12). In fact, those details of her urban environment that Wilson does provide appear to "denote a setting that is incidental, rather than essential, to Wilson's vision of life and to the life of her characters. For Wilson's characters are neither formed nor transformed by Vancouver, a setting seemingly devoid of conditions associated specifically with city life" (12). Gelfant continues: "Ordinary people in ordinary rooms, at cocktail parties or alone, lonely or contented, invariably *look beyond* their immediate surroundings to an endlessly changing landscape framed within a window" (14). In this respect, Gelfant argues, Wilson ultimately "reveals the city as a point of departure" (14). I have found Gelfant's description of Wilson's urban environment to bear striking resemblance, both in terms of its form and its function, to the rural settlements that Moss has argued are so essential to the pastoral experience. Indeed, Gelfant points out that "Wilson's personal view of Vancouver contains a place evocative of pastoral longings which neither the city nor the far country can provide, except in fleeting visionary moments or in fantasies of escape" (22). Recall that it is through his window that Mr. Willy perceives the natural landscape, "seeing sometimes his emancipation" (Wilson 326). This then is the final transposition that I will cite: it is the transposition from Grove's rural settings in "Snow" to Wilson's urban environment in "The Window". It characterizes Mr. Willy's environment as one that is relatively secure, yet not so far removed from nature that it mitigates the effect of the geophysical presence.

Frederick Philip Grove represents a pastoral setting in his narrative “Snow”, and Ethel Wilson portrays an urban environment in her short story “The Window”. In contrasting these works with respect to their embedded didactic imperatives, those obstacles that challenge these imperatives, and the representations of place in which the action is situated, it strikes me that the shift from pastoral to urban settings might best be described here as one of transposition, rather than transformation.

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