F. P. Grove's "Difficult" Novel: The Master of the Mill

W. J. KEITH

IF we ignore *Consider Her Ways,* which is more properly classified as a satire, *The Master of the Mill* was Frederick Philip Grove's last novel. Ever since its first publication in 1944, it has been the subject of critical controversy. Responses have tended towards extremes; it has generally been seen as either a culmination of his earlier fictional writings or as a radical departure from their characteristic qualities. Although it is not difficult to trace continuities of theme, the innovations of form and structure are more immediately conspicuous, and for the original reviewers the differences clearly outweighed the connections. Not only did the world of political maneuvering, high finance, industrial strikes and the problems of automation and unemployment seem remote from Grove's earlier concern with pioneers on the prairies, but his technical experimentation, most noticeable in the distortions of time-sequence and the use of varied angles of narration, seemed far removed from the familiar and straightforward chronicle-form of such novels as *Our Daily Bread* and *Fruits of the Earth.* Unfortunately, critical appreciation of the book has too often been determined by "traditional versus modern" preconceptions. For those whose literary preferences tend toward the conventional modes, *The Master of the Mill* is disappointing, confused, and probably a betrayal; for those who favour experimental methods, it is Grove's most ambitious and challenging contribution to the art of fiction. My purpose here is to reconsider its similarities with and divergences from the pattern of his earlier works, and to

assess the appropriateness of the novelistic method to Grove's evident aims.

It will be convenient at the outset to notice the ways in which the novel resembles those that Grove had previously written. As has often been pointed out, although he had turned his attentions to the industrial world, the mill in question is significantly a flour-mill; Langholm processes the wheat that the prairie-farmers have grown, and in consequence Grove's interest may be seen as a natural development and extension of his earlier material. Rudyard Clark is specifically described as a "pioneer,"[1] and the tracing of his enterprise through two later generations offers close affinities with Grove's earlier themes. Both Abe Spalding in *Fruits of the Earth* and Ralph Patterson in *Two Generations* are pioneers who in the act of pioneering create a society that eventually rebels against them. In seeing the mill and all its attendant political and social problems as a development of the pioneering process — "the growth of the mill," we are told, "was like a fact of nature" (p. 327) — in shrewdly noting that the mill eventually dispenses with the miller, Grove is merely pursuing his subject to its logical, if ironical, conclusion.

The problem of the generations is, of course, another familiar Grove theme. In *Our Daily Bread, Fruits of the Earth* and *Two Generations,* the younger generation rebels against the pioneering father, and in each case the conflict arises from two basic issues: the desire of the young to use the modern, mechanized processes of which the old disapprove, and their rejection of what they consider tyrannical control. In *The Master of the Mill* we can recognize the same pattern at a more complex stage of development. The two generations have been extended to three. Samuel Clark, the central figure, reacts against the domineering ways of the father Rudyard; his aim had been to "direct the fortunes of the mill for the good of mankind" (p. 39), but he is prevented, once in control of the mill, from carrying out the reforms he desires. His own son Edmund, by

contrast, rebels against Samuel's liberal notions, and acts with a single-minded ruthlessness that recalls his grandfather. The effect is at one and the same time similar but very different. Perhaps the chief difference lies in the fact that the industrial process is seen as impersonal and inevitable. Edmund is as much a slave to "the system" (p. 191) as the father from whom he wrests control. Because the conflict is no longer personal, it cannot attain to tragedy; the very act of rebellion is seen as mechanical.

A third resemblance should also be noted. Though less conspicuous than the others, a factor that may explain why it has not been generally recognized, it is, I believe, a significant undercurrent in Grove's work. Despite the fact that his pioneering heroes are primarily men of action, naturally suspicious of intellectual abstractions, they all find themselves at one time or another asking the question: what is the meaning of life? John Elliot senior asks it when his children are growing up and the break-up of the family is threatened;[2] Abe Spalding asks it after the building of his house and the death of his son.[3] Samuel Clark's asking of the same question sets in motion the whole process of remembering and reliving the past which forms the basis of the whole novel (pp. 60, 93). Similarly, his idealistic dreams are continually frustrated by the realities of the situation he inherits. The attempt to relate the everyday actions of a man's life to the larger context of a half-discerned, half-questioned universal purpose is a subsidiary theme in the earlier novels that becomes central here.

Thematically, then, the novel can be accepted readily enough as a logical outcome of the earlier work. None the less, it would be foolish to deny that the way in which the story is told is profoundly different. Whereas the previous novels depended for their effects upon the slow processes of clearing land and producing crops, processes measured against the relentless passing of the years (*Settlers of the Marsh* and *Fruits of the Earth* offer the clearest examples

here), *The Master of the Mill* is essentially retrospective. The focus is not upon whether or not a pioneering hero will succeed in his ambitions, but how and why a particular chain of events developed as it did. The action itself is less important than understanding the consequences of action. In other words, we find ourselves in a fictional world close to that of Conrad's *Nostromo* or Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. The impact of a dominant industry (the Langholm flour-mill or the San Tomé mine in Conrad's novel) upon the life, fortunes and moral attitudes of both employers and employed recalls *Nostromo;* the attempt to piece together the history and ultimate failure of an ambitious "design" (the Clarks' and Sutpen's) provides the analogue to Faulkner's novel. A crucial shift of emphasis has taken place from the events themselves to an intellectual comprehension of them; or, to make the point in another way, the setting has changed from the outer landscape to the human mind.

This development has important consequences not perhaps for the themes themselves but for the more complex treatment of the themes that thereby becomes possible. Whereas the protagonists of the earlier novels could be recognized as representative (within or beyond their regional settings), more sophisticated correspondences can now be presented. These can even evolve into full-scale allegory; as Douglas Spettigue has recently reminded us, the novel "offers an allegory of the development of Canada as a nation (Rudyard inherits the mill in 1867)"[4] and the point can be extended. The generations can easily stand for historical phases. The name Rudyard suggests, via Kipling, that his generation represents a "rugged individualism" linked with expansionist and even imperialistic tendencies; Samuel Clark is the spokesman for a later, more liberal generation that, by the very nature of its liberalism, is unable to control the processes of which it philosophically disapproves; Edmund, his son, can be seen as a new breed of corporate executive obsessed with the

abstract concept of power, a type that needs no elaboration here. "Control of the mill," Edmund insists, "in the long run, means control of the country" (p. 219); again the San Tomé mine in *Nostromo* (*imperium in imperio*) comes to mind. Needless to say, the protagonists are more rounded than this skeleton-interpretation might suggest — they are, after all, individuals and not merely types — but it is their relation to the history of industrialism in the modern world that gives the novel an impact that transcends the purely literary.

Similarly, the broader thematic issues, while developing naturally and inevitably from the situations in the earlier novels, take on new resonances and significances in the complex world of industrial finance. Both Abe Spalding and Ralph Patterson, for example, had to learn that they could not impose their absolute will upon their families; here Edmund specifically tells his father: "These days, nobody is any longer master in his own house" (p. 279). But the title of this last novel raises a related and central question: who is "the master of the mill"? Is it Rudyard who, ironically as a result of his crime, controlled the mill's fortunes even after he was dead? Or Samuel, whose planning was more successful than his control? Or Edmund who snatched control from his father only to relinquish it again at his premature death? The two-part structure of the novel ("Death of the Master," "Resurrection of the Master") deliberately cuts across the three-generation division, and different names can be attached to the "Master" of both title and section-divisions with equal validity but very different results. At the same time, it is clear that the so-called masters are in reality as much slaves as their employees: "Before the machine we're all equal, as we're supposed to be before the law" (p. 193. cf. pp. 94, 246). In a sense, then, the true master is the mill itself, and we are now confronted with an even more disturbing question: is the continually-growing, perpetually-

evolving mill itself an appropriate image of our world — at once a brilliant creation and a frightening automaton?

This leads us directly to a matter of extreme importance — the ambiguities involved in the moral judgments that, as readers, we are called upon to make. A crucial element in the novel, which we must recognize and acknowledge if we are to come anywhere near appreciating it, is the double aspect with which Grove invests both the mill and the mill-owners. So far as the mill is concerned, the point is made conspicuously enough in the first chapter:

> To many people, as the old man was aware, that mill stood as a symbol and monument of the world-order which, by-and-large, was still dominant; of a ruthless capitalism which had once been an exploiter of human labour but had gradually learned, no less ruthlessly, to dispense with that labour, making itself independent, ruling the country by its sheer power of producing wealth.
> To others, fewer these, it stood as a monument of a first endeavour to liberate mankind from the curse of toil; for it produced the thing man needed most, bread, by harnessing the forces of nature. (p. 21)

Throughout the novel, these two extremes are kept continually before us; it is only critical myopia that may encourage us to stress one at the expense of the other. This initial statement is balanced at the close of the book by the visions in the mind of the dying Samuel that take the revealing form of a trial, "indictment" duly followed by "defence" (p. 327). Often enough, the ambiguity is caught in a clashing phrase: "It meant something tremendous, cruel, soulless" (p. 106); "the result is the flawed marvel of the present mill" (p. 225).

The same balance is maintained in the presentation of the mill-owners. Rudyard's financial expertise is described as "magnificent" but also "ruthless" (p. 65) — the same word we have seen applied to the mill. But the most ambiguous "master" is undoubtedly Edmund. It may well be a temptation for many readers to see in him a horrendous nightmare-vision of a 1984 Big Brother, yet Grove does not present Edmund in this way. Like the fluctuating re-

actions of his wife Lady Clark (p. 264), our own feelings should be mixed. When he wrests control of the mill from his father, we are offered a picture of indecisive weakness, sympathetic but inadequate, against a strength that is admirable as well as fearful; Edmund's arguments are both terrifying and cogent. Again, in the scene in which, with Lady Clark, we overhear the verbal exchange between Edmund and the Prime Minister, we are forced — most probably against our will — to admire his overbearing but brilliantly successful tactics. Several characters in the novel are prepared to set the great man above the law (pp. 175, 225, 230), and although we are unlikely to be convinced by the argument, we are bound within the context of the book to acknowledge its force. When Edmund talks about "the dictatorship of mind over matter" (p. 228) the tension is still maintained, and his achieved end of having the mill run "independently of human labour" (p. 262) can be interpreted as both a blessing and a curse.

The foregoing thematic discussion was a necessary preliminary to any consideration of the literary qualities of *The Master of the Mill*. Too often the "modernist" aspects of the book have been defended or censured as if they were independent of the particular needs of the story. Yet Grove himself has described his extended search and eventual discovery of "the inevitable form — the only form in which the book can convey its message."[5] This suggests — what we might in any case have assumed — an intimate relation between the form and content of the novel, and although the reliability of Grove's autobiographical writing now has to be questioned, there seems no reason to doubt his word in this particular instance. His remark counters any suggestion that, in constructing his novel as he did, he was merely taking advantage of a fashionable mode. But the question remains: why was this the only form in which the book could convey its message?

What, indeed, is its "message"? Grove presumably refers not to any detachable moral but to the principal focus

of concern within the narrative. It is a tribute to the book's richness that any single answer appears inadequate. The psychological impact of industrialism, the burden of power as it affects three generations in a single family, the efforts of an individual to justify the actions of a lifetime, what R. E. Watters has well described as "the human cost of the ownership of property" (p. xii), Douglas Spettigue's allegory of Canada already discussed, the antithesis between machines and mankind — all these can be promoted and defended, but none is in itself satisfactory. If I suggest that the novel's "message" consists of an intermingling of all these themes, the very phrasing may offer a clue in explanation of its form. The blending of the generations is not a wilful complicating of the issues but an essential point in the argument. The parallel merging of Samuel's thought-process with that of Lady Clark's — "Suddenly, by a sort of transference of thought, she became aware that the visions, hers and the old man's, had merged; as if their blood were beating in a common pulse" (p. 230) — is not so much a formal device as an emblem of connection. In turn, Samuel's attempts to justify his own life and Lady Clark's efforts to understand the situation she is soon to inherit, themselves blend with the reader's desire to achieve a fair and balanced perspective on this fictional world and to relate its significance to the world in which he lives. The novel is "difficult" by virtue of the profound issues with which it deals and the subtle interconnections which it both emphasizes and, by means of its form, illustrates. Inevitably the book makes considerable demands upon the reader. First and foremost, he must be capable of discriminating between "the chronological confusion in the old man's mind" (p. 249) and the artistically-enriching complexity into which Grove transforms it.

The opening chapter presents us with a series of paradoxes demanding explanation. There is no attempt at suspense, since we learn immediately of the son's premature death, the old man's approaching senility, and Lady Clark's

ensured succession; instead, we are invited to probe the history of the mill which, we are told, has also been Samuel's history. From the start there is much that is puzzling. We see Samuel looking "night after night" out of the window towards the mill, yet "there had been years when he had carefully avoided that view" (p. 19). The main scene of action is for the most part divided between the mill which is in many respects the industrial centre of the country and the great house "which stood aside from the main stream of life" (p. 19). Again, the mill "had been [Samuel's] love before he had owned it" but "became the object of his hatred after it had become his" (p. 20). Although the novel is entitled *The Master of the Mill,* we soon learn that in fact "it had always ruled his destiny" (p. 20). The alert reader will take note of these oddities, but he will not equate paradoxes with confusions. In his opening pages Grove not only stimulates our curiosity but suggests the extent of the artistic challenge ahead.

Because the action of the novel is recreated in the minds of Samuel Clark and those immediately surrounding him, the artistic effects are primarily intellectual and associational. As a consequence, subtleties that would be out of place in the earlier novels fit well here. Grove is able to draw upon all kinds of structural, imagistic and verbal devices to enhance his effects. The distortion of time-sequence is not a simple matter of recalling the past, as it had been with John Elliot senior in *Our Daily Bread.* Grove here establishes a basic tension between Samuel's frustrated attempt, on succeeding his father, at "cutting himself loose from the past" (p. 58) and his efforts at the point of death to vindicate his life by re-examining and reliving the past. This is a structural irony at the heart of the book. Another, which has provoked criticism, involves the trinity of Mauds that together represent the women in Samuel's life. That the coincidence assists the old man's "chronological confusion" is the most obvious but least interesting reason for the device. More cogently, it connects

the three leading female characters who thereby provide a balance for the three male Clarks, and suggests (albeit indirectly) that those who are associated with the mill tend to give up their individual traits and, to adapt a phrase from W. H. Auden, forget themselves in a function. Their geographical origins strengthen the Canadian allegory, since Maud Carter, who became Samuel's wife, was an "aristocrat" (p. 46) from the Pacific coast, Maud Fanshawe, later Lady Clark, was daughter of the chancellor of Eastern University [sic], while Maud Dolittle, the secretary who rises to become vice-president, was a product of Langholm, apparently located on the borders of Ontario and Manitoba. The national variety involved here must, I think, be deliberate. (In addition, the repetition of the name may even be intended to emphasize the industrial versus personal clash that is at the centre of Tennyson's poem *Maud*.)

The dominant image in the novel is that of the pure-white mill itself. "The whole tremendous structure was dusted over with flour, inside and out" (p. 20), and at night it is flood-lit to stand out against the actual darkness of the surroundings and the possible moral darkness of its own implications. Its equivocal whiteness carries the same sinister suggestions as Melville's famous chapter in *Moby Dick* and Robert Frost's poem "Design," and it becomes a disturbing leit-motif, combining the beautiful and the menacing. On several occasions it is described as a pyramid, and the inevitable association of the original pyramids with the slave-labour forced to construct them carries over to the political context of the modern building. Underlying verbal implications are frequent in this novel — too frequent, indeed, to be indicated in any detail here. To take one further example, Rudyard is described in an obituary as "a Titan of Finance" (p. 60); the phrase is repeated, and transferred to Samuel, and the effect of repetition helps to remind us that the original Titans were, ironically,

giants whose attempts to claim excessive power ended in absolute defeat.

The physical circumstances in which the past is recalled also prove appropriate. At first reading, we may find Samuel's wandering around his house tedious, and the drives in the car around the Loop a clumsy and repetitious device to stimulate the recalling of lost time. But Samuel Clark is entrapped by events as inexorably as his failing health limits his movements to house and car, and the repeated drives represent more than the obvious image of man captivated by mechanism. The Loop has temporal as well as spatial associations, and aptly reflects the form of the whole book. Indeed, throughout the novel, movement in time is juxtaposed with movement in space. The continual references to modes of transportation create a cumulative effect. Ruth Clark's accident with her car, Sybil Carter's expulsion from her carriage, Samuel's confessional talk with his wife on the transatlantic liner, the sombre procession of cars moving across country to catch the delayed "Interoceanic" train just before the crisis, the mention of aeroplanes at Arbala and motor-cycle escorts at Langholm — all these offer us images of human beings engaged in perpetual and meaningless motion, a pattern that associates them disturbingly with the relentless, unending process of the mill.

All these effects Grove has been able to introduce and develop in the interests of the new and challenging aspects of his subject-matter. There are other effects, however, that he attempts but is not able to carry off successfully. These must also be considered, since the crucial point is not that Grove has employed "modern" methods, but whether he has employed them appropriately and with success. His chief weakness lies in the way necessary information is conveyed to the reader; too often it is clumsily presented in dialogue between characters who must already be in possession of the facts. We are asked to believe, for instance, that Lady Clark would not recognize the first name

of Samuel's brother-in-law, that she would not yet have heard the basic details of the early married life of her late husband's parents, that she would not know when and why the house in which she had been living for some fifteen years was originally built (p. 72). In this case Grove has clearly failed to solve his technical problems.

Similar criticisms can be made about much of the dialogue. Whereas the presentation of Samuel's own recollections is invariably convincing, the conversations between Lady Clark and Odette Charlebois are disappointingly stiff and lifeless. The subject-matter is important — often, indeed, fascinating — but it has not been integrated into art. Often the reader becomes uncomfortably aware of clumsy bridge-passages that draw attention to the very difficulties they are supposed to conceal. As in his earlier novels, the stories-within-the-story seem contrived. Again, there is little verbal variety between the reminiscences of Miss Charlebois and the usual style of Grove as omniscient narrator (the same problem occurs in *Settlers of the Marsh* in Ellen's account of her earlier life as she tells it to Niels Lindstedt). Similarly, the chapter from Captain Stevens' history of the mill is barely distinguishable in style from the rest of the book, and one suspects the same would have been true of Odette Charlebois' diary which is mentioned several times but — surprisingly — never actually quoted. From time to time Grove offers a glimpse of what might have been achieved. The slangy speech-rhythms of Sybil Carter are well caught, and so is the broad, crude wit of Charles Beatty and Mr. Ferguson, but these are noteworthy only because they transcend the usual standard.

The ending of the novel also presents difficulties. At first Grove seems to be attempting an "open-ended" effect. The death of Edmund, alluded to on the first page and anticipated throughout the book, is adroitly managed, since Grove deliberately presents what is supposed to be a climax so that, as he expresses it, "it looked like an anti-climax" (p. 321). Edmund dies, appropriately enough, at the very

moment when the mill becomes fully automated and self-sufficient. His *raison d'être* in the universe is over; the sniper's bullet is symbolically timely but, *sub specie aeternitatis,* pointless and irrelevant.[6] By contrast, however, in the last two chapters Grove appears to be striving for a climactic resolution that seems neither possible nor desirable. I am left doubtful whether Samuel's dying vision (pp. 327-28) is offered as illusion, senility or truth, and I am even more uncertain whether Miss Dolittle's harangue in the final chapter after Samuel's funeral — a series of confident but complacent speeches culminating in the last line of the novel: "I have come to place a great confidence in the capacity of the collective human mind" (p. 332) — is offered as serious commentary carrying with it authorial approval. A balance is doubtless being attempted between basically optimistic and pessimistic attitudes to the mill, but although she disclaims the role of prophet, the rhythmic crescendo strains towards an inappropriate finality. Surely *The Master of the Mill,* of all novels, should have ended with a question-mark?

My criticisms in the last three paragraphs may sound harsh, but this is a novel that both demands and deserves a rigorous scrutiny. Over a quarter of a century ago, Desmond Pacey described Grove's theme as "much the most ambitious task yet essayed by him or any other Canadian novelist,"[7] and the remark remains valid to this day. It is a work of many dimensions which could only have been achieved by a major artist, and one of the marks of its distinction is that it is universal in import while remaining firmly and uniquely Canadian. I hope to have demonstrated that Grove indeed found the "inevitable form" for his novel and that the nature of his material demanded a departure from his earlier methods. I believe that his extraordinary qualities as a novelist enabled him to gain some remarkable effects in his only attempt at this kind of novel but that his lack of experience in this new form is also evident in the minor but palpable blemishes. It should

be stressed, however, that the alleged difficulty of the novel has been exaggerated. The only real difficulties arise in the rare instances when Grove himself is confusing (when, for instance, the time-scheme, established through specific dates, refuses to fit with the historical references to the Boer War). Otherwise the novel presents no serious problems to anyone prepared to read it with the attention and intelligence that Grove has a right to expect.

The Master of the Mill is, I believe, at one with the earlier novels in being a work of major quality slightly marred by clumsiness of detail. It could not have been written in the chronicle-form to which his other works belong, nor (and this too needs to be stressed) would they have been improved had Grove written them in the "modern" manner. Samuel Clark's obsessive introspection is, after all, a product of the urban-industrial society that his mill has helped to create; it would be as inappropriate for Niels Lindstedt or Abe Spalding as it is apt for him. But *The Master of the Mill* is a work of greater importance than many consummately-achieved novels that do not aim at grappling with major themes. Like the equivocal mill that dominates it, Grove's "difficult" novel may itself be described as a "flawed marvel" (p. 225).

NOTES

[1]*The Master of the Mill,* New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 94. All quotations, henceforth incorporated into the text, will be to this edition.

[2]*Our Daily Bread* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 12, 46, 135, 160-61.

[3]*Fruits of the Earth,* New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), Ch. xiii. Abe Spalding may be seen, indeed, as a close rural equivalent to the master of the mill. See, for example, p. 100, for the master of the land who is in reality its slave.

[4]Douglas O. Spettigue, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p. 124.

[5]*In Search of Myself* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1946), p. 438.

[6]We may well recall the similar situation of Gerald Crich: "The whole system was now so perfect that Gerald was hardly necessary any more," D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, Modern Library (New York: Random House, n.d.), p. 264. Even Edmund's death is closer to Gerald's than might appear at first sight. The return of the body on the sled across the frozen lake is symbolically equivalent to Gerald's "ice-destructiveness" death in the Alps. Moreover, the whole of Lawrence's chapter "The Industrial Magnate" offers a fascinating analogue to Grove's preoccupations in this novel.

[7]Desmond Pacey, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945), p. 84.

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