

*Lessons on Perspective: W. O. Mitchell's  
"The Vanishing Point"*

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I

"Excuse me, sir, but there is a bumble-bee in your orchid."<sup>1</sup>

MY GOD, Fyfe's response had been violent, snatching up a spray can from one corner of the bench, nailing the bee in a bitter cloud, so that it had tumbled out of the blossom and dropped to the tiles" (p. 94). Ian Fyfe, Regional Director for the Western Region of the Department of Indian Affairs and breeder of prize orchids, thus demonstrates that he himself does not always exhibit the dispassionate objectivity that he counsels for another. "We'll just have to see what transpires" (p. 82) and "don't let yourself get personally involved" (p. 87), Fyfe can advise Carlyle Sinclair who, in his dual capacity of teacher at and agent of the small Paradise Valley Stony Indian Reservation, comes to report the problem of a missing Indian student. The problem is important to Sinclair precisely because he is personally involved. He has just discovered that his one prize pupil, the first Indian to matriculate from his school and a student who has gone on to be a nurse in training at a city hospital, is away from the hospital without official leave. He had plans for Victoria Rider; her two weeks' absence from class might fatally compromise those plans. Fyfe can be calm, rational. But Fyfe had plans for one particular orchid. He was going to cross it with the General Eisenhower. General Eisenhower's pollen was already waiting in the fridge when the bee intruded and "spoiled it for General Eisenhower" (p. 95).

So the first lesson here is obvious and simple. One's own concerns are self-evidently valid, important; others who see things differently are clearly missing the larger point. W. O. Mitchell, in *The Vanishing Point*, gives us numerous variations of such ego-centric relativity. Sam Bear, for example, is not particularly moved by his wife's determination that he should retrieve an errant fifteen-year-old daughter who has embarked on a "blanket marriage" during the night:

She [Mrs. Bear] spit at Sam. "Any man go get her — but you — look at you . . . you go now — right now! Before it's too late!"

"Too late now," Sam said. He wiped the spit off his forehead.  
(pp. 228-29)

Then he discovers that the absconding lovers have also absconded with his best horses, and that is another matter: "'Go get Judea's gun!' He turned to Mrs. Bear. 'Blanket roll! Put in some grup! Hurry!!' He turned to Carlyle. 'Phone Mounties! Tell Fyfe — tell Ottawa!'" (p. 231). Or the Reverend Heally Richards can decide that his Rally for Jesus revival meeting can best conclude with an old and ailing Indian being cured through the "pah" of faith. Esau Rider, carried into the last session in chief's costume and war bonnet, will surely guarantee television coverage. So Richards does not heed the warning — "a faith-negative statement" (p. 292) — that Esau might not last until the appointed time and thereby arranges to fail to raise the dead in front of the rolling TV cameras that were his main concern.

There is more, however, to the bee in the orchid than the immediate oversights of self-serving vision. Of course Fyfe does not see Sinclair's concerns as Sinclair sees them, and Sinclair, just as naturally, returns the favour. Furthermore, when each looks directly at the other each sees rather more accurately than when either happens to glance askance at his own nature and being. There is something almost unnatural, as the younger man suspects, in Fyfe's insistence that the flowers be what he wants them to be. Sinclair visualizes Fyfe examining "with careful passion — a purple, velvet blossom big as a bread and butter plate" and carefully labelling it "BLCH Fyfe 4N" — a Fyfe flower (p. 86). He imagines "orchid-like Fyfe or Fyfe-like orchid offspring, in rows and rows of nursery flasks" (p. 86). When Fyfe describes

another specimen as a "complete miss," Sinclair even demands: "Who says?" He further explains that query by asking if the orchid has been disappointed: "Does it consider itself a complete miss?" (p. 85). And Fyfe also rightly suspects that Sinclair's overwrought concern is out of all proportion to the stated facts of the case. Indeed, the very terms with which Sinclair emphasizes the importance of immediately finding the missing girl and the lengths to which he goes to do so show that more is at issue than a perhaps ruined prospective career. Late in the novel he finally recognizes that for some time he has been in love with Victoria. That realization is, ironically, brought home to him when he discovers that there has been, so to speak, a bee in his orchid too. When he at last finds Victoria and forces her to explain her unlikely behaviour, she admits that she is pregnant. Then he can lament the partial truth: "My child — my child! Oh God — you were my child! How I loved you — loved you — till he took you — took you!" (p. 382). But only the partial truth; he hardly loved her as a child.

Victoria is pregnant. She is also deeply ashamed. That second reaction is as important as the state that prompts it. She knows that she has carried the weight of Sinclair's aspirations for her and that she has failed to be the success whereby he would justify all his past labours. Right to the crucial admission, in fact, Sinclair articulates his official public assessment of the girl: "You're Victoria and you are special — to me! You are the whole thing! You have been the whole thing for a long time! Do you understand that? Not just for me — for all of them" (pp. 364-65). Only after the damning confession does he begin to recognize some private truths — that he had loved her and that the one effect of that hitherto unacknowledged love was the perpetual demand that she be worthy of it. "Mirror me — oh, mirror me — but not too true," he had asked (p. 367). And while so doing he has mirrored her too:

That was all he'd done — given her a mirror — showed her for the first time to herself. He'd been her mirror, and for him she'd capered and postured and made faces, done all sorts of tricks he'd asked her for, but she couldn't do them worth a damn if he wasn't there to mirror her. (p. 367)

"Listen to the orchid, Fyfe — let her tell her own delight and need" (p. 86), mused the man who never listened to the Indian girl.

## II

"To please the R.C.M.P. . . . And the spring bears" (p. 222).

What the orchid might desire does not enter into the plans of those who devote themselves to the care and tending of orchids. Neither does the Indian's perspective particularly concern those who run the reservation. Again Mitchell provides a number of telling examples, most obviously the Reverend G. Bob Dingle, Sinclair's predecessor at the Paradise Valley School. This minister to the Stonies (a position he retains after he gives up teaching) exudes a moist Christian bonhomie and an easy faith in natural goodness, especially his own. He is happy "to be able to help these people in [their] progress" to a more Christian life (p. 153). That "help" mostly takes the form of opposing unsanctified and irregular unions even though, as another character points out, "the fine old Stony Institution of trial marriage . . . works out pretty good — when they hit on the right combination . . . they remain faithful — even monogamous" (p. 153). But the wrong kind of faithfulness is not the right kind of progress. Thus the Reverend Dingle's concern, which also partly demonstrates, as his opponent on the marriage debate subsequently observes, his total incapability. It is proved in other ways too. During his three years as school master, he apparently taught his classes only one thing. The children learned to sing "Bringing in the Sheaves" in Cree. Not in Stony or even in English but in Cree. The Reverend Dingle believed that "lyric Cree might soften their [guttural Stony] speech" (p. 155). A single item also seems to be the sum of all that he has learned — or, more accurately, mislearned. He has acquired a Stony phrase which he dispenses everywhere under the mistaken assumption that it is a high compliment, "You please me very much." It actually means bullshit. The comic touch is pointed and appropriate. One of the Indians (probably Archie Nicotine, of whom more later) has provided this limited man with the perfect piece of misinformation. "For ten years or more"

the Reverend Dingle "had gone his sweet and joyous rounds saying 'bullshit'" (p. 176). Sinclair, corrected when he misused the expression he learned from Dingle, can recognize the rightness of the mistake whereby Dingle continually proclaims to the Indians what he is and to what his work among them amounts.

The Reverend Dingle, as even his name implies, is almost a caricature. He is too simple, too shallow to be taken very seriously. Yet the same general failings that he embodies can be found in obviously better men. Arthur Sheridan, for example, is the reservation agent when Sinclair first arrives in Paradise Valley. He bitterly resents the few questions that the teacher once asks him about the possibility of better livestock management. Peter Sanders, a doctor who occasionally visits the reservation, subsequently explains the whole matter for Sinclair. Sheridan has done his best with Indian and Indian department apathy for thirty-five years and once did more than his best. A man with a glass arm who still loved baseball, he bought equipment on his department salary, begged uniforms from local businessmen, and made an Indian team into champions — a touch of real pride. What Sheridan has endured and done, Sanders maintains, gives him a "right to" his hostility. Sinclair will have the same "right" too when "they throw that banquet for you and give you your gold watch . . . thirty-five years from now" (p. 183). Yet Sinclair, when he subsequently visits the reservation barns and corrals, sees neglect and decay everywhere. Fences and buildings have been stripped for firewood; supply sheds are open to the weather and the contents, intended for the coming winter, are lying scattered and rotting: "And he could never again share Peter's slob compassion for Sheridan with his glass arm — or for G. Bob Dingle" (p. 188).

Even Ian Fyfe, the Regional Director, who has worked longer and harder than Sheridan, has his obvious failings. Fyfe is honestly concerned. He sees that Sinclair would be a good teacher and goes to considerable length to hire him. He knows that Sheridan has been lax and so arranges, when Sheridan retires, to split Paradise Valley off from the Hanley Reservation and makes Sinclair the agent there too. More to the point, he has devoted much of his career to remedying one "terrible need" of the Indians on

the reservation. He had early seen how inadequate the usual diet was, particularly for the children. But he allowed his commendable concern to take the very Scotch form of faith in oatmeal. When few Indians could be "seduced" into eating their porridge, much less properly cooking it, Fyfe had a still better idea. The one redeeming triumph in his forty-five years of service is, he believes, the Fyfe Minimal Subsistence cookie, an oatmeal based concoction "containing all the carbohydrate-protein-vitamin richness necessary for twenty-four hours of life" (p. 88). In every reservation school every child receives his daily cookie. Yet the name gives the game away and reveals the extent of Fyfe's defeat even as he explains to Sinclair the genesis of his triumph:

And now he [Sinclair] had a new insight into Fyfe. . . . Fyfe saw the Indians — all of them — as terminal cases to be made comfortable as possible within the terms of the reserve system — the budget and the Indian Act — and the civil-service machinery. All you could do for terminal cases — wait and see if they expired.  
(pp. 91-92)

The defeat is even more ironic in that Fyfe does not know that the children hate the cookies which mostly end up scattered and broken on the classroom floor. Sinclair knows, he sweeps them up every day.

Sinclair, from one perspective, is an even better man than Fyfe. He is capable and he does manage to achieve some notable objectives. Finding workable "levers" — the most workable one is using the Indian's money to pay the Indians individually to do work for themselves that they should not (by white standards) be paid for doing — he soon has the reservation buildings put in order and put to good use, houses built, gardens planted, and more effective agricultural and cattle raising practices instituted. He also, as previously noted, sees one student through high school and launched towards a professional career. That too is a significant first. But from another perspective he is no better than the Regional Director. When, late in the novel, he decides that Victoria has failed him, Sinclair is also honest and fair enough to recognize that he has failed her, that he has failed all of them. He came to the Reservation not from any commitment to the Indians but to escape his sorrow after the loss of his wife and child. While

there, he has played the good Samaritan without any real concern for or knowledge of the recipients of his goodness. In short, he has acted for his own applause and not for their well-being: "What a fool he'd been just to feed, just to clothe — to keep alive only. They perished and he taught them arithmetic; they thirsted to death on their time desert and he gave them reading and spelling lessons" (p. 366). He has been a false mirror not just for Victoria but for all of them: "for the mirror held up to them simply told them they were separate and they were alien and they were opposite people. Be ashamed, the mirror said to them; not more aware — not more conscious — effective — just more ashamed" (p. 367).

It is at this point that the larger social dimension of the novel begins to come clearly into focus. At this point too the reader should also see how one brief and seemingly peripheral episode is actually central to the text. I refer to Archie Nicotine's attempt to save a hunter foolishly lost in a December blizzard, an episode that merits consideration in some detail. The story is first referred to early in the novel when Sinclair rides into heavily wooded foothills beyond the reservation under the dubious assumption that Victoria might be hiding out at the head of a canyon which has long been especially important to the Stonies:

It must be near here that Archie had found the hunter two years ago. The first severe spasm of winter — mid December — with a wind-chill factor of sixty below — the man had wounded a cow moose from his Volkswagen on the road, then followed her, wearing his war-surplus golf jacket, his red-margined rubber boots and ankle socks. (p. 105)

Sinclair and Archie had been returning from the city (and the city in this novel, it should be noted, is Calgary only slightly disguised) when they came on the signs of what had happened — the empty Volkswagen, the blood and the tracks in the snow. Archie had gone after the man; tracked him to where he was already lying dead, frozen in the snow; propped him up so that he could be found again; and then frozen both his own feet in getting back alive himself, a task that he manages only by striking the proper "balance between too much effort which would make

him sweat [and then freeze], and not enough that would lead to capitulation and death" (p. 106).

It was a heroic attempt, but Archie returned is hardly welcomed as a hero. Quite the contrary. Later in the novel we discover what actually transpired. A Mounted Police constable soon visits the Reservation and makes it quite clear that the official judgment is possible foul play. The police believe Archie may have murdered the man he ostensibly attempted to save. This suspicion emerges as the officer questions Archie, who resolutely refuses to play the suspect — as one sample of their exchange can amply indicate:

"But how did you know he was dead?"

"Mainly by him being dead."

After a moment the constable said, "You saw his tracks were covered up?"

"Hey-uh." ["Hey-uh" can mean yes.]

"Well — were they?"

"Hey-uh."

"That you followed — to him."

"Dead."

For several ticks of the kettle on the stove the constable stared at Archie. "Just how — do you follow tracks — covered with new snow?"

"It's difficult," Archie said.

"Wouldn't it be impossible?"

Archie shrugged.

"Wouldn't it?"

"For you."

"Or for anybody."

"Hey-uh." ["Hey-uh" can mean no.]

"You mean impossible for anybody?"

"You do." (p. 219)

Archie goes on to observe that not all tracks are covered equally: "If you climb under dead-fall on your belly you will make a pretty big track" that "it will take one hell of a lot of snow to cover," so "I would track you by now and again to where you were lying froze to death — on your face and all your fingers split open and that is the whole situation" (p. 220). But it is hardly "the whole situation" for the police constable. The bruises on the dead man's face . . . ? The missing gun . . . ? He cannot



make as much of these questions as he wants because Archie has, he suspects, destroyed the evidence. Thus the one charge of which he is certain:

"You are not supposed to touch the body! We want to see that body first — exactly as it was!"

"By spring it would be a lot different, you understand."

"I am telling you . . ."

"High."

"Do not — ever again — touch or move — a body!"

"Next time I won't," Archie promised. "To please the R.C.M.P."

The constable stared at him for several long moments, then consulted his notebook again.

"And the spring bears," Archie added. (pp. 221-22)

Finally, exasperated, Archie has some questions of his own: "what happens to a person when they fall all over dead-fall and hitting himself on his face and head?" and "why will I waste my strength and make myself sweat to club him to die which he will anyway. Write down — it don't hurt much to freeze to death so I would not have to kill him to save him from suffering . . ." (p. 223). The questions are valid. Nevertheless, Archie has it all wrong. He can imagine the police suspecting him of killing a dying man to end his suffering. Their imaginings, however, are much darker — murder, not mercy killing. Might not Archie have come on the man while he was still alive? Only very fresh tracks could be followed in the falling snow. Might not he have taken the gun? It is, after all, missing, and Indians are notorious thieves. Might not he have killed the victim to hide the crime? There were those bruises. In short, this episode epitomizes one of the major lessons in the text and shows how pervasively whites pander to their own distorted view of what the Indian is.

But again there is more to Mitchell than immediately meets the eye, for even at his most seemingly didactic he still subtly deploys his effects to keep the novel from degenerating into simple social moralizing. The policeman's suppositions must be set against a later scene in which the "criminal" confesses. When Victoria admits her fall, Sinclair, in a passage previously quoted, soon articulates his mirror metaphor, the shame the Indian sees

when looking into the mirror of the whiteman. Yet his metaphor suggests a crucial question that Sinclair does not voice at the time. Since the mirror he describes must reflect both ways, what does the whiteman see when he looks into the mirror of the Indian? The question is definitely there, and Sinclair does explicitly answer it later. "How could he have left Victoria on that city street? Archie hadn't" (p. 385). Archie, it might be added, also did not claim that he thought of Victoria as a daughter, did not secretly love her. By any relative standard, Sinclair soon admits, "Victoria had not truly failed, but he had" (p. 385).

He finally sees the picture of himself that is brought to him partly by the way he is reflected in his previous viewing of these others. Moreover, the picture is there even if it is not perceived. Ridiculous suppositions about Archie as a possible murderer more accurately reflect, in best projection fashion, some dark corners in the Mountie's own official mind. One final point must be made about the Indian in the mirror. Mitchell suggests that the whites have made the mirror and that they have engraved in it two inaccurate images. There is their picture of themselves (the generous way in which they all, throughout the novel, judge their own actions) and their picture of the Indian (the standard stereotypes that so immediately underlie the suspicion under which Archie refuses to lie). No wonder the Indian does not see himself reflected favourably in that mirror.

### III

"But oh, my friends there is a hell — and the price of sin comes very high!"

"That'll be thirteen ninety-five," Gloria Catface said to the young man with the acne-ravaged face. (p. 75)

The more serious implications of the novel are balanced by a deft comedy, which is itself mostly a matter of balance. We can note, for example, how Mitchell intersperses excerpts of the Reverend Heally Richards's Burning Bush Hour radio sermon and Gloria Catface's rather briefer transaction with the young man to allow the two actions to comment on each other. The commenting is apropos. As Archie notes early in the novel and as Sinclair ob-

serves near the end, the Reverend Richards in action does provide his clients with a kind of mental and emotional sexual release. Moreover, the cash he collects for those services rendered he calls the "love offering," a term that Gloria might employ with equal validity. But Gloria works the street a bit more honestly than her religious counterpart — the visiting American evangelist who was, coincidentally, a good huckster of a travelling salesman before he took up the religious trade — works the town. She knows what she is peddling and the price she should be paid.

The Flaubertian juxtapositioning in this scene also anticipates the meeting of the two later in the novel, an encounter that is itself tinged with hints of the prostitute's profession. A city policeman overhears a conversation in which Gloria is offered forty dollars and reasonably assumes that she is going about her usual business despite earlier warnings that next time she would be arrested. The vice officer is forestalled when the Reverend Richards explains that Gloria was being solicited only "to add a touch of wild colour" to the last week of his services (p. 283). The forty dollars was to get her white doeskin Miss North-west Fish and Game outfit out of hock. But if the officer was somewhat mistaken about the transaction, so is the Reverend. He does not recognize what he sells and neither does he really want to recognize what he is buying. Nevertheless, as his earlier conversation with Archie and his subsequent plans for the large role that "Princess Gloria" will play in future revival meetings both attest, he is clearly infatuated with the woman. Thus he is particularly pleased and inspired when, at the final meeting, she is one of the first to come forth to be healed. "And she would be touched first — hers would be the first glory" (p. 357). The glory, however, does not quite turn out as intended:

He tipped up the lovely flower face. He leaned over, his ear to her mouth.

"Your pain and sufferin', Sister Gloria — that you may have it lifted from you now, praise Him!"

"I think it's clap," Gloria said, "again." (pp. 357-58)

This latter opposition, the two in conjunction, perfectly balances the earlier one, the two in counterpoint. But Mitchell is a

master of structural balancing, and more is at issue here than the way in which Richards is weighed against Gloria. Richard's misreading of Gloria and his attempt to cast her as a saved lamb of the Lord must call to mind another character who also insists on misviewing another young Indian woman (and a lost one at that) through the rather inaccurate lens of lamb imagery. "*Jesus, dear Jesus, I'll find you, little lost lamb, Victoria*" (p. 115), Sinclair assures himself, early and late, as he pursues his search for his missing former student. Indeed, the most extreme balancing act in the novel is the careful counterposing of the preacher and the teacher. Despite the obvious differences between these two, Mitchell still insists on their unlikely similarities. Yet this insistence, the ways in which Richards is portrayed as a parallel to and a parody of Sinclair, leads to one of the most important "lessons" in the book. The protagonist finally sees himself reflected best not in the Indians but in his own distorted double. This perspective is not a completely accurate one either, yet it is essential. Only after Sinclair has assessed himself in the worst possible light — a "mountain pulpit" fraud who is "not one bit different from Heally Richards" (p. 366) — can he begin to rise above that worst possibility.

Richards is, in numerous respects, Sinclair in a lower key. They each had an often unhappy childhood presided over by a missing mother and an imperfect father. They each aimed at a profession — Sinclair at being a doctor, Richards at being a dentist — that they each early found they could not afford. They each came to their present occupation through an attempt to escape the unhappy consequences of an early marriage.<sup>2</sup> They are each caught up in their feelings for a young Indian woman but neither will admit to himself the real nature of those feelings. They each fail in a crucial plan, a self-serving plan that ostensibly served a particular Indian, and they equally lament that failure in almost identical terms: "Oh God — Oh God . . . Why would He ask Heally Richards . . . to lift this weight — not ten or twenty or a hundred pounds beyond his strength — but tons!" (p. 360); and Sinclair: "Why — oh, God, why had he been asked to accomplish impossibility so far beyond his strength — beyond all human strength" (p. 366).

Even the two crucial failures are oddly conjoined. Richards was going to heal old Esau Rider as the grand finale to his Rally for Jesus revival meetings. "Oh God, please — please choose — through Heally Richards — to lift up that old Indian from that stretcher before the Mercy Seat! Raise up that feathered buckskin Lazarus with your revivin' pahr!" (pp. 348-49), he prays just before the last meeting. But as this prayer-fantasy and fantasy prayer continues, it becomes clear where the Reverend's real interests lie. "Rise up Esau! And Heally Richards too! Right up out of the evangelic bush-league . . . !" (p. 349). How appropriate that his prayer is only partly answered. Esau briefly raises himself from his stretcher only to fall back dead, and, a Lazarus with a vengeance, he will not rise again. Esau was also Victoria's grandfather, a connection that is further emphasized by the fact that Sinclair finds Victoria immediately after Esau's death. So he confronts his failure right after the Reverend Richards has seen his own soaring hopes "shot [down] — dropped from dazzling realms of holy light . . . , falling to dark earth, head over hopeless tail-feather" (p. 360). Victoria admits her pregnancy, and Sinclair sees his hopes dashed too, sees his lamb in a new and different light: "Little lost lamb soliciting — little lost lamb screeching Stony hate and obscenity on city streets, dark hair curtaining down her convulsing shoulders as she vomited in alleyways" (p. 367). A future Gloria even though Gloria herself has not yet sunk so low.

#### IV

Dear little lamb, Victoria! (p. 59).

A tiger — with satisfied jowls and lovely stripes shaded in with his art pencil. But a tiger would have been ridiculous on [the] prairie. (p. 321)

And so is an eighteen-year-old lamb. Nevertheless, Victoria is, for Sinclair, his lamb long before she is lost in either of two senses. All along he has insisted on her innocence. Thus, as a schoolchild, she was not to dance the Chicken Dance with the boys even though he could not answer her question, "What's wrong with it, Mr. Sinclair?" (p. 208). Later, he is even more perturbed when

Saunders, as a doctor, observes, that "Victoria [has] been ready for it at least a year now" (p. 233). "It" is sex. Victoria is then sixteen, a year older than Martha Bear who has just embarked on her "blanket marriage." But Victoria, Sinclair proclaims, "is not Martha Bear." "She is not going to get . . ." (p. 234, ellipsis in the text, for he cannot even bring himself to say the unthinkable word). Sinclair is just as naively certain of his own innocence. Thus, when Victoria fails two of her matriculation examinations, Sinclair insists to her mother that the daughter will pass the supplementaries: "I'm going to cram her as no student has ever been crammed before. She's going to move in here and we're going to work from morning to night — every day!" (p. 238). He is then quite surprised when the mother decides that she and the rest of the family will move in too. Who could imagine that his concern for the high school senior was not purely pedagogical? In short, his long sustained misreading of Victoria derives from an even longer and more sustained misreading of himself. Furthermore, since the two misreadings are so interrelated, it is not surprising that the quest for the missing Victoria soon devolves into a second quest carried on concomitantly with the first one. He searches for the missing Sinclair too. These two quests also make possible another counterpointing essential to the novel. As Sinclair carries on his present search — physically travelling the reservation; the surrounding countryside; and, especially, the city — he also conducts extensive mental forays into his immediate and more distant past. He reviews his eight years on the reservation, particularly the way in which he has related to Victoria, mostly to understand where she might have gone wrong. He also reviews his whole past, particularly his own childhood, which more and more becomes a study of why and how he might have gone wrong.

Central to this larger process is the episode that gives the book its title. Sinclair remembers "Old Kacky" and the lessons he began to learn when he entered Grade Six. Such as the vanishing point. Done clearly, and the rules are clear, it works: "the posts and poles marched to the horizon, they shrank and crowded up to each other, closer and closer together till they all were finally sucked down into the vanishing point" (p. 318). It is a lesson in

artifice: "He could not get over how doing something so crazy should end up looking just right" (p. 319). It is also a lesson in error. As his school-friend, Mate, soon tells him: "Isn't any vanishing point . . . the rails don't meet . . . C.P.R. couldn't run their engines if they did — not ten foot if the rails were coming together" (p. 325). As with the trees he long and laboriously draws in a land where none grow naturally, he is learning to see his land as it is not. Consequently, Sinclair can still notice years later as he is driving into Calgary that the "highway edges and marching telephone poles disappeared before they could come together properly at a vanishing point" (p. 32). The Alberta road does not look (a point that the cover photograph perfectly conveys) the way it should be drawn.

More important, however, the physical mis-seeing expands into a metaphysical misperception too. The real lesson of the art lesson comes when Sinclair goes beyond the vanishing point. The picture seems too empty, so he puts in one of the trees he had recently been taught to draw. Which is "deliberate disobedience":

"What if a boy did this sort of thing in arithmetic? History? Geography? Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, Mr. Mackey."

"Deliberate disobedience."

"Yes, sir."

"You know I have to strap you."

"Yes, sir."

Five on each hand. Nothing before in his eleven years of life had hurt that much. (p. 321)

"Do you see what I mean?" The eleven-year-old Sinclair sees. A way of drawing is a way of seeing is a way of being. This lesson sums up numerous lessons of his childhood — the narrow propriety of his Aunt Pearl; the Victorian sexlessness that will not allow even such minor and harmless experiments as his one misadventure with the magic lantern.<sup>3</sup> The ideal is a tight little life of rectitude and good works, an ideal that allows, at the best, the careful and cautious impersonal concern that Fyfe can show for the Indians. It does not allow Sinclair to know Victoria.

What has been learned, however, can be unlearned. Prompted by the proximity of Heally Richards as an even worse example

of the failure of false goodness and the intense pain of his own failure with Victoria (characteristically perceived first as Victoria's failure with him), Sinclair begins to re-evaluate his past. As Dick Harrison has rightly observed, "the older Carlyle must find his way slowly and painfully back from the vanishing point of his civilized perspective" and recover an "earlier state of natural perception."<sup>74</sup> That earlier state was already being lost before the lesson that gives the book its title. Sinclair's first impulse was to put a tiger in the drawing but even as an eleven-year-old he did not do so. He must learn to admit the tiger. The tiger, as Harrison also observes, is, finally, Victoria and is, like Victoria as lamb, "clearly taken from William Blake."<sup>75</sup> Yet this critic seems to overlook one of the basic points in the novel when he suggests that "paradoxically, Mitchell's image of the vital energy which disturbs Sinclair's Victorian perspective is drawn from elsewhere in the British tradition."<sup>76</sup> Harrison here apparently assumes the same structuring polarity that John Moss more explicitly maintains by arguing that "in the end, he [Sinclair] transcends white liberalism and participates in the Stony's joy and suffering and alienation, because all things are open to him in their world of unified being."<sup>77</sup> The central opposition in this novel is not, however, the simple dichotomy of the white's world and world view versus the Indian's. Sinclair does not learn to be an Indian, he learns to be a fuller version of himself — and that lesson can be very well taught by William Blake.

As the Blake references should make clear, the governing polarity in the novel is innocence versus experience.<sup>8</sup> Sinclair, at the very beginning of *The Vanishing Point*, can think of himself as a "thirty-six-year-old adolescent" (p. 3) because he is one. He wakes, in the first paragraph, to the sound of "a ruffed grouse drumming out again and again its invitation to join the living world" (p. 3). Yet not until the very end of the novel does he deign to enter the dance and even then he has to be asked by the eighteen-year-old girl who is, socially and emotionally, hardly an adolescent and who certainly is not the "child" that just a few weeks earlier he could so innocently postulate. At the final Prairie Chicken Dance — "certain as birth or death or love" (p. 386) — he finally gets the message that he did not receive when the



grouse first drummed. He wakes next morning in bed with Victoria. Something has transpired; he is really personally involved. He has learned to come to terms with innocence and experience, his own and Victoria's.

At this point the novel ends with a traditional comic affirmation of life. Sinclair's morning-after musings are even more positive than the night-before recognitions that lead him to — and from — the dance: "Tell you what, Aunt Pearl and Fyfe and Old Kacky and Ottawa — I'll marry her; isn't that something to transpire: union of two — no — two-and-a-half in the holy bonds of matrimony!" (p. 388). The Beulah (another touch of Blake) rises again. A seismographic survey's underground charges had blocked up the springs that fed the stream that flowed through the reservation, but the water breaks through whatever impeded it and the osprey dives once more. Nature will not be permanently forestalled. And neither will men nor machines. Archie at last gets his truck to run.

Yet this comic conclusion also sounds its own unusual note. Comedy typically dispenses rewards and punishments according to accepted social codes; it affirms the values of a society. Sinclair, however, reaps his reward, Victoria, only by transgressing against the values that he is supposed to uphold.<sup>9</sup> As he well knows, there will "be hell and heartburn all the way to Ottawa" (p. 387). That "hell and heartburn" gives us again, in a more minor key, the largest lesson on perspective in the novel. Comedy usually reveals the limitations of individuals who obviously do not measure up, a Heally Richard for example. But how valid are the standards whereby even a Richards is judged and can they weigh a Carlyle Sinclair? Or must he weigh them? He must and he does. And the lesson of the comedy thereby extends beyond the individual characters; cultures can be judged too — can be judged, like characters, through calculated contrasts. On this larger level, *The Vanishing Point* represents an unusual form that might be termed cross-cultural comedy. Even in the almost clichéd ending, Mitchell still sustains the complex vision that informs this book. As earlier observed, Carlyle Sinclair does not "go Indian" but he does cross over some of the personal and cultural limitations that previously inaccurately defined him.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The actual quotation is: "There's a bumble-bee in it [the orchid]." W. O. Mitchell, *The Vanishing Point* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973); rpt. 1975 in the Macmillan Laurentian Library series), p. 93. Subsequent references to this paperback edition of the novel will be made parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> The similarities between the two should not obscure equally important differences. Thus Sinclair attempts to escape the sorrow and sense of loss occasioned by his wife's early death while Richards has simply abandoned his wife.
- <sup>3</sup> And of course the dubious propriety that finds that adventure unacceptable magnifies, as much as the magic lantern, that which it would suppress.
- <sup>4</sup> Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 198.
- <sup>5</sup> Harrison, p. 198.
- <sup>6</sup> Harrison, p. 198.
- <sup>7</sup> John Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 257.
- <sup>8</sup> Or, more accurately, it is that of a complex and experienced innocence versus an experience much more innocent than it at first appears.
- <sup>9</sup> This point is also made by Harrison who observes that "Sinclair must reject the world of Victorian values he has been hired to impose upon the Indians, and in the ending that White world is not redeemed as we would expect it to be in Mitchell's earlier novels" (p. 198).

## Fundamental Realities

"Once upon a time — about 1620 — a Puritan named his dog Moreover because of the following passage in the Book of Judges (7:5): 'Moreover, the dog came and lapped up the water.'"

— from Abraham Katsh's *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy*

However, his master would have none of that.  
 He got the leash. Opened the door  
 And pointed toward the nearest bush.  
 But, notwithstanding, the family's stern father  
 Saw the telltale stains after work.  
 And, moreover, the dog met yesterday's news  
 Rolled-up, head-on, face-to-face.

SANFORD PINSKER