

Troppo Agitato: *Writing and Reading Cultures*

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And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange. (Judith Wright, "Nigger's Leap")

WHEN WORKING COMPARATIVELY — “inter/culture, inter/text” — the critic confronts a series of questions formulated by Tzvetan Todorov in *La Conquête de l'Amérique: La Question de l'Autre* roughly as follows. How can we reconcile a belief in self-determination and noninterference with a belief in the value of cultural interaction? How can we create conditions for equal dialogue while avoiding eclecticism? How can one accept the relativity of values while holding to an ideal of the possibility of shared values? How can we achieve the ideal of “heterology,” which makes understood the difference of voices — what Wilson Harris terms the “harlequin cosmos at the heart of existence” (Harris 120) — while avoiding the twin perils of insipidity and self-parody? What is the discourse appropriate to this heterological mentality? (Todorov 12).¹

Novels by the Canadian Rudy Wiebe and the Australian Randolph Stow raise these questions, decolonizing imperial fictions of conquest and creating varieties of a post-colonial discourse in which, in Robert Kroetsch's memorable phrase, the “voices override the voice” (Neuman and Wilson 55). Randolph Stow's playing with the paradoxes of a *troppo agitato* tempo in *Visitants* draws attention to literate society's excessive awareness of self and time in a way that illuminates these interactions, not only in Stow's work but also in Rudy Wiebe's fiction. *Visitants'* central character, Alistair Cawdor, imagines a piece of music

marked *troppo agitato*, which Dalwood rejects as an impossibility but Cawdor dreams he would like to hear — a piece which would end with all the instruments in bits, beginning “to sprout and turn into the trees they were made from” (46-47). This apocalyptic vision of time moving backwards from art into nature, from wholeness into fragments, and from stasis into flux, challenges the Western system of values that until recently has privileged the first of each of these terms. What Cawdor imagines here is not the end of the world, but the end of the Western construction of the world as divided between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in artistic creation. He envisions a work of art that appeals simultaneously to all the senses while undergoing a series of metamorphoses itself. Art as action rather than artifact. An exploding Grecian urn we can hear instead of see.

Cawdor can imagine such a possibility because he himself is “like one of his cracking instruments” (47), as a result of the tension he experiences between, on the one hand, his sympathetic involvement with the Trobriand Island culture, to the extent that they recognize him as “a black man truly” (41), and on the other, his job as the representative of the Australian colonial administration in the region. The tension between these two roles pulls him apart, while creating the substance of the novel — an official inquiry into his suicide, composed of the various voices of the other human instruments involved in his last days. When he first mentions such a composition, Cawdor insists: “*Ma non troppo, agitato ma non troppo,*” adding that he will mark the end “*troppo troppo.*” The final section of *Visitants* is indeed marked *Troppo*, signalling that *Visitants* may be read as the complex musical structure that Cawdor envisions, and dies to create. At his death, Cawdor tells Dalwood: “‘I saw, Timi. I saw. Down the tunnel. My body. Atoms. Stars. . . . I can never die’” (179-80). This is an ironical statement for the literal-minded Dalwood within the text, but for the reader, who is simultaneously both within and outside the text, it is at once ironical and true: Cawdor lives and dies in words.

In enacting Cawdor’s vision of an art appropriate to his experience in the Trobriands, *Visitants* challenges traditional novelistic ways of recording history and ethnography. With its eight voices

reporting different versions of the same events in several languages, the vibrations *Visitants* sets up explode all cultural preconceptions based on dualistic oppositions. The play with voices here, and in Stow's *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, which complements *Visitants*' focus on harrowing cultural interactions with its own healing counterpointing of past and present, parallels the experiments in dissonance Stow undertakes with the musical group *The Fires of London*. These novels stress *hearing* above seeing, placing the reader or listener in an imagined position of direct as opposed to indirect communication with the past. This movement from vision toward hearing implies a higher valuing of oral cultures.²

Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* recreates an oral society in the process of being destroyed by the *tropo agitato* dissonances of the Western mode of being. Yet it too participates inevitably in that Western awareness of time, as demonstrated by its own interest in the movements of history that would have been totally unthinkable for its central Cree characters. *Big Bear* uses multiple voices and languages specifically to challenge an imperially ordered version of history. Here, as in *Visitants*, the interaction of indigene and "visitant" leads to the destruction of the novel's central character, but Wiebe's novel highlights the indigenous rather than the visitant experience, so that Big Bear and Cawdor may be seen as reversed images of one another, as reflected in a distorting mirror. Where Cawdor is always hiding behind a book, carrying his typewriter into the remotest jungles, Big Bear is the only chief who refuses to sign the white man's treaties. Refusing thereby to enter the world of literacy, he remains distinguished by the power of his remarkable voice. Cawdor, the representative of literacy, is destroyed by whispering voices in a language not his own. Big Bear, the representative of orality, is destroyed by written documents, also in a language not his own. Their tragedies demonstrate the fatality inherent in an inability to deal with otherness, an inability these texts exist to correct.

Where Cawdor's apocalyptic visions signal renewal, Big Bear's predict the end of his world, of life as the Plains Cree knew it, drowned in a gushing fountain of blood (130). Cawdor bleeds

through the open flooring of his hut, drenching the ground beneath and his sleeping servant as his dreams rush skyward toward exploding stars. Big Bear dreams himself out of the ruined present back to the Sand Hills of his traditional belief. With both deaths the dying men rejoin the natural world, but Cawdor looks skyward and forward into the future while Big Bear looks earthward and back into the past. Cawdor dreams of fragmentation while Big Bear dreams of a metamorphosis into “everlasting, unchanging, rock” (415). Rock, as he tells Kitty, is “the grandfather of all, the first of all being as well as the last” (314-15). Rock implies the totalizing tendency of the oral mind, while Cawdor’s imaginary composition characterizes the individuality and the restlessness of the literate mind. Wiebe’s story, too, has the hardness and heaviness of rock, of the knowledge of a past that cannot be changed, of a weight that must be borne, of the sense, in Big Bear’s words, that “There is a stone between me and what I have to say” (20). In Stow’s novel, the rapid disintegration and growth of the tropical rainforest mirror the *tropo agitato* rhythms of one form of cross-cultural encounter — literate culture’s attempt to understand the otherness of a traditional oral culture. In Wiebe’s novel, the starkness and immensity of the Canadian prairies image the more ponderous rhythms of a different symphony of voices — an oral culture’s grappling with the complexities and inflexibilities of a literate culture.³ Both compositions challenge long-established Western notions of form, particularly the narrative drive that has shaped history as well as fiction.

Each novel takes the form of a public inquiry or trial, initially into specific events — a cargo cult outbreak, the Frog Lake Massacre — associated with individuals — Cawdor, Big Bear — but finally representing an inquiry into the nature of imperialism itself, and into the kinds of cultural contact the histories of the English Diaspora in Canada and the Pacific allowed. Both novels concern themselves with actual events. Wiebe undertook extensive research to ensure the accuracy of *Big Bear*,⁴ and he claims there is documentary evidence to authenticate the existence of every character in the novel. Stow deals with a more recent past, part of which he experienced himself, part of which has been carefully documented by others, to create a novel in which the events but

not the individual characters may claim a historical existence (Note and Prologue). Wiebe's distant past and Stow's immediate past raise questions about how we relate to the past as individuals and as nations, and about how we distinguish between these two kinds of past: the so-called historical, distant past, experienced through research; and the more immediate past, experienced in person, directly, but also indirectly through the responses of others. Another way of wording this distinction might focus on the difference between the versions of the past furnished by oral transmission as opposed to those furnished by written traditions. Each writer bases his authority to write on the past on both written and oral experience. Through the use of multiple voices, they attempt to recreate an oral culture's sense of itself in terms a literate culture can understand — not an easy task.

Both books question — Wiebe explicitly and Stow implicitly — traditional historical methods and the philosophical assumptions on which these are based. In exploring the current “problem of historical knowledge” (1), Hayden White's *Metahistory* directly addresses this question of whether history should be regarded as “a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated” (2). In his consideration of the deep structure of the nineteenth-century European historical imagination and the tropes through which it functions, White privileges irony as “transideological” (38) although he recognizes that in its (positive) foregrounding of the “problematical nature of language itself” (37), it does tend to “dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions” (37), a tendency he appears to see as negative. White later resolves this problem for himself in “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” where he claims that it is the recognition of the very meaninglessness of history itself, when seen ironically — that is without the benefit of a shaping ideology — “which alone can goad the moral sense of living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible” (134). Wiebe and Stow each confront this same problem of the ideological rootedness and hence potential meaninglessness of history,

but ultimately to reject White's existentialist solution in favour of a faith in universal religious values that they imply can transcend cultural differences in a non-authoritarian way. Wiebe combines modernism's reliance on irony with a return to an older form some writers have considered impossible in the twentieth century — that of tragedy. True to its *tropo agitato* principles, *Visitants* also manages to be both ironic and tragic at once. In both fictions, the hybridization of form corresponds to the colonial experience of a hybridization of cultures. The tragedies of others may always appear ironic from an outsider's perspective. In these novels, Wiebe and Stow combine the insider's experience of tragedy with the outsider's perception of that tragedy's ironic framework within fictional discourses that privilege neither.

In reworking their documented historical material, Wiebe and Stow attempt two tasks: they show us the past simultaneously from several perspectives, as seen at once from the indigenous, from the semi-indigenous, and from the visitants' points of view, in juxtaposition; and through this creation of a triple perspective, in which trees are simultaneously trees alone, instruments alone, and both at once, in which a *tropo agitato* rhythm is at once possible, realized, and impossible, they create an alternative view of the Other as both equal and different.

As Todorov points out, the Western writing of the history of imperialism is inevitably entangled with the record of its attitudes to others. In approaching others, the West either sees them in Christian-inspired egalitarian terms, as equal but only equal because not really different, or as irrevocably different and therefore not human. This latter approach objectifies others while the former obliterates them: both deny the other a voice of his or her own.

To escape these unattractive alternatives, Todorov looks to the "métissage des cultures" (107) and to its creation of a "heterological mentality" (255), best evidenced for him in the approach of the contemporary ethnologist. Ironically, contemporary ethnographers are increasingly looking to creative writers and literary theorists for new ways of reading and writing their discipline (Fischer 198). James Clifford writes that "Ethnography

is actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races and genders" (Clifford 2). He might have been describing these novels. Both Wiebe and Stow cross traditional disciplinary boundaries to create the seismic disruptions of the old certainties through which the "heterological mentality" — the cross-cultural awareness — of a harlequin universe can be born.

As representatives of the white settler societies, these writers focus on Todorov's mediating term in the dialogue between Europe and the Other. The post-colonial imagination depends on the mixing of cultures. Its interest lies in the characters who embody that process in their lives. Colonial fiction in Canada and Australia stressed the tragedy of the mixed blood, a person who belonged nowhere, because of the shared imperial and native horror of "impure" race. But post-colonial fiction re-evaluates that stigma, seeing it as the unjustified product of an ethnocentricity that post-colonial experience of multiculturalism has outgrown. Wiebe is just one of the writers responsible for a rethinking of the Métis Louis Riel's role in Canadian history, renaming him Canada's first representative national hero.

Translators are the most important characters in both these novels, and scenes of translation the central events. Stow goes much further than Wiebe, presenting not only English approximations of speech in the Trobriand language, but also many passages and recurrent words in that speech and in pidgin, forcing the reader to participate in the initial alienation and the subsequent effort to understand. By *refusing* the role of translator at crucial moments, functioning instead as the mere recorder of what is heard, Stow draws attention to the centrality of translation to all we do. Wiebe, in contrast, enters so fully into the translator's role, that the Métis writer Maria Campbell asserted that she could hear Big Bear himself speaking through Wiebe (Keith, *Voice* 151). At such moments, translation becomes possession, and the translator a medium through which the Other may speak.

In their different ways, then, each text reminds us that sounds become words only when they are assigned a meaning. The "meaning" translation provides is usually a visual metaphor that

turns the sounds of the words into a spatial image: “the Queen’s hat” in *Big Bear* or “my house is bleeding” in *Visitants*. Those with the authority to assign meaning wield great power. Big Bear’s voice is the source of his authority, as Cawdor’s ability to speak the language of the people he administers is his. Yet Cawdor doesn’t know all the words, as Osana takes pleasure in reminding him: he cannot belong completely. And Big Bear’s voice cannot prevail with whites. They listen only for the translated meaning of what he says, and his speech defies translation because the dominant concepts in the two languages are so different. Whites need not bother making the effort to bridge the gap, because as Gabriel Dumont observes in *The Scorched-Wood People*: “I talk Cree and Blackfoot and Sioux and French, but not white. You have to talk white or it helps nothing” (108). The character who can “talk white” has access to power, but if he or she is not unilingual, the effort of balancing “white” words against the words of the other may prove destructive. It leads Louis Riel to defeat in *The Scorched-Wood People* and it turns Osana into a monster in *Visitants*. It exacerbates Cawdor’s alienation, and spares Kitty only because she stops listening when the effort becomes too great. Yet if individual characters prove too weak to maintain the *tropo agitato* rhythms of the “heterological mentality,” the texts enact them successfully. The novels are composed of a series of monologues, interspersed with scenes of inadequate translation: only the reader can make dialogue possible, reading the parts into a whole of her own imagining, that may well change in emphasis with each new reading. Thus almost despite themselves these novels — and myself as reader — reveal our immersion in a literate culture. Hearing is inevitably linked to incomprehension or confusion; it is seeing, or reading, that leads to understanding.

The translators in Wiebe and Stow embody the mixing of cultures in their lives and in their work, functioning as the mediating term between colonizer and colonized. Often, like Peter Hourri and Peter Erasmus in *Big Bear* or Osana in *Visitants*, they are members of the dominated group who act as agents for the dominators. Yet in Canada and Australia, there is another group, often unilingual, who serve a similar function — the set-

tlers of European origin who over the years began to see themselves as Canadian or Australian. To the British in Britain, these people were colonials; to the indigenous peoples, they were colonizers. Their own sense of themselves was often more complicated. Cawdor and Dalwood embody their divisions in *Visitants*; Kitty McLean, John McDougall, Kerr and McKay in *Big Bear*.

Through these characters, Wiebe shows Eastern Canadian imperialism in Western Canada, destroying with British and American aid the indigenous Indian and Métis cultures of the west. Stow recreates Australian imperialism, itself the child of British and American imperialisms, operating uncertainly to Australia's north, in the Trobriand Islands. This focus on the agent, who is neither entirely Western nor entirely indigenous in outlook, complicates these fictional histories considerably. Canadians and Australians, accustomed to seeing themselves as the innocent victims of European arrogance, are forced to see themselves also as recreating that arrogance in their relations with the native peoples whose lands they have confiscated, or which they administer for those they do not trust to administer themselves. Yet this additional perspective is not introduced to shift the blame for the evils of the past, but to discover in that ambiguous heritage some hope for a more productive mixing of cultures in the future.

Todorov has identified the key elements of the encounter of the I and the other as it takes shape between indigene and visitant: language, first of all (one always defines others in terms of their knowledge or lack of knowledge of one's language); and following on from language, perceptions of presence and absence, centre and periphery, belonging and alienation, ritual and improvisation, and finally cyclical and chronological notions of time. Just as Todorov does with Aztec civilization, so Wiebe and Stow, with North American Indian and Trobriand Island cultures, recreate these alternative world views from within, at least as far as a sympathetic outsider ever can, but without relinquishing the opposing Western world view. In this way, all three books create the cultural dialogue that history itself never allowed.

Yet there are some crucial differences that distinguish each writer's approach to the otherness of his material. Wiebe's Chris-

tianity draws him inevitably toward assimilating the other into the established Christian framework, as his epigraph from *Acts* makes clear: "God who made the world and all that is in it, from one blood created every race. . . ." As Todorov puns, since Christianity is universalist, it implies an essential "in-difference" between all men (168). What are perceived to be only superficial differences are finally subsumed in sameness, but a sameness determined by the Christian, by the Western, point of view. While this attitude has the virtue of recognizing the other as human, the recognition can take place only within the perceiver's terms of reference.

Stow's approach appears to be almost diametrically opposed to Wiebe's. Quoting from William of Newburgh in the Note preceding the novel, he claims: "I design to be the simple narrator, not the prophetic interpreter; for what the Divinity wished to signify by this I do not know." Whereas Wiebe's narration, like that of the Dominican recorder of Aztec life, Diego Duran, seeks not only to record Plains Indian life but also to interpret and explain it, Stow's work more closely resembles that of Bernardino de Sahagun, whose approach Todorov sees as similar to that taken by ethnologists today. Instead of translating one culture's values into terms understandable by the other, the ethnologist uses each culture to reciprocally illuminate the other. Thus Stow has two epigraphs from English literature, the first of which represents lines spoken by Caliban (the archetypal Other) to European visitants, and the second of which contains lines spoken by a European to his fellow countrymen. These are followed by a dedication in Pidgin, which roughly translated dedicates the book "to one who speaks my language," which can also be interpreted as "to my fellow countryman." But who are the expatriate Stow's countrymen? And what is Stow's language? The language in which the epigraph itself is written — Pidgin? The language in which the novel is written — English? Or the language of fiction itself, of imaginative recreations of reality, of a sympathetic yet distanced involvement in all things human? Stow's dedication implies that one can cross cultural boundaries if one is prepared to learn the other's language. Comprehension of cultural difference, rather than race, makes a compatriot.

With this ambiguous dedication, these apparently clear-cut differences between the two novelists begin to lose their clarity. Both preface their books with reference to a Christian "Divinity" positing a truth value and an absolute eternal perspective from which their histories may take on new meanings. And in practice, Wiebe's professed Christianity does not lead him to deny the otherness of an Indian reality. *The Temptations of Big Bear* unfolds itself slowly toward Kitty McLean's epiphany in court, the moment when she finally realizes that the equality and rapport she felt with Big Bear could not be equated with a mutual understanding she had always assumed. Although she can understand Cree, and how difficult, if not impossible, it is to translate European concepts into a language that has no words for them, Big Bear cannot understand English nor begin to understand the ideas that motivate English-speakers. She has assumed that her sympathy for his difference was reciprocated. But in court she realizes that he does indeed seem to be "entirely without comprehension of all things white" (387). This revelation in turn brings into question the understanding she thought she had of Big Bear, both as an individual and as a Cree. She understands "at last she could not understand him and his people" (388). Thus Wiebe avoids the danger of erasing difference while claiming equality. The first step is to recognize one's ignorance; only then can one reach out to discover not only the difference of another but also more about oneself. This questioning of Christianity's tendency toward ethnocentricity, implicit in *Big Bear*, is clearly voiced in *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), a book which in some ways can be seen as *Big Bear*'s sequel (Keith, *Art* 82).

It is fitting that Kitty McLean should be the one to make this discovery. Herself a product of the two cultures, English and Indian — through education and experience but not through birth — she is also a woman who has endured erroneous male assumptions about her nature based on her gender. In *Visitants*, Saliba, an Islander growing up in MacDonnell's house, also knows both cultures, yet experiences a similar moment of culture shock as darkness, when Dalwood attempts to dance with her in the Western fashion. Saliba, too, has felt that she and Dalwood had achieved a certain understanding, and not just through the act

of making love. His inability to perceive the shame he inflicts on her through his insistence she conform to a practice she finds barbaric shakes the complacency of both of them, and sends them running back to the security of their own cultures. The fragility of such intercultural exchanges, and yet the necessity of continually rebuilding them, characterizes Kitty's wavering rapport with Big Bear as well as Saliba's more straightforward exchange with Dalwood. Both writers avoid the sensationalism of so many literary treatments of interracial sexual encounters: they give both male and female, black and white, participants full human stature and voices of their own, stressing their humanity rather than their gender or their race throughout.⁵

In contrast to Wiebe's narration of Kitty's sensitive response to Big Bear, the diary of the "Canadian Volunteer" reveals the same attitude toward Kitty, woman as other, as it does toward the Indian as other — neither is perceived to be fully human (327). Indeed, Kitty is so tanned, and so unlike his idea of how a white woman should be, that he even wonders about her race. The power of Wiebe's novel lies in its demonstration of that humanity denied to the other by the Canadian volunteer and by the aggressive power of ignorance that he represents.

But Wiebe, unlike Stow, is not content simply to allow these competing voices to speak for themselves: Wiebe's authorial voice intrudes to guide the reader toward his own interpretation of events. Even the title indicates this bias, with its implicit evocation of a Christian context for Big Bear's heroism: he is to be seen as a Christian saint rather than a pagan warrior, or more properly, as somehow both simultaneously as one shifts the lens through which one views him. This is "exemplary history," deliberately rejecting the pretences of "value-free" history that enabled historians to ignore the Indian experience for so long. As exemplary history, it acknowledges its biases even as it tries to circumvent them, but it never pretends to be "value-free" nor to assert that all interpretations are equal.

The neutrality of "visitants" as a title is as striking as the commitment implicit in Wiebe's. Colonizers, conquistadores, pioneers, settlers, explorers, tourists, missionaries, spies: any kind of specification as to type of visitant immediately involves value judge-

ments the more general term avoids. Unlike Brathwaite's *Arrivants*, for example, "visitants" suggests a temporary, provisional arrangement that cannot last. While this is true of the Western presence in the Trobriands, Stow expands its relevance to a meditation on the temporary quality of all human life. On the other hand, it is the destruction of the Plains Indian civilization, and later of the Métis Nation, that inspire Wiebe to similar meditations on the brevity of all human achievement.

When and how does a visitant become an arrivant? To some extent, all colonial literatures pose just this question. Wiebe and Stow show two ways the process may take place: one can arrive by destroying indigenous cultures to impose one's own, as many of the whites in *Big Bear's* Canada do; or one can arrive by assimilating, by learning the indigenous language (and all that implies), as Cawdor and MacDonnell do in *Visitants*. Although both processes end in tragedy for the central protagonists in these two novels, the success of numerous peripheral characters — of the MacLeans in Canada and MacDonnell in the Trobriands — demonstrates the potential of cross-cultural interaction. And in a marginalized literature, these apparently peripheral characters assume more importance than a traditionally constituted criticism can allow.

Nonetheless, the characters who combine the insights of both cultures to create their own discourse independent of the official orthodoxy cannot prevent that orthodoxy's destruction of what it refuses to understand. As in classical tragedy, Big Bear's defeat is relieved only by the triumph of his personal integrity and his spiritual vision. Although it destroys him, he refuses to accept the white culture's judgement that he and his people are inferior. Cawdor's death displays more of the excess of the Elizabethan period which provides *Visitants* with its two epigraphs. His suicide is balanced by the comic restoration of order as Benoni succeeds Dipapa as chief of the local people. There is no such balancing action to mediate Big Bear's fall. Yet the chief difference lies in the attitude to the judgement of another culture. Big Bear refuses the white judgement; Cawdor internalizes the black judgement.

Big Bear's tragedy lies in his powerlessness to preserve his people's dignity and their values in the face of a white intrusion, based on its judgement that the Cree are inferior. The Cree experience this judgement and its aftereffects as a blight. It is as if they had been "breathed on" by a wendigo. Cawdor's tragedy lies in his powerlessness to preserve his dignity in the face of the Trobriand judgement that he has been shamed — "his shame must be very great" — a judgement that arrives like a magical invasion of outside forces he is powerless to prevent, and that is paralleled by the microbe invasion that is slowly killing his body.

Thus Cawdor's story appears to be the flip side of Big Bear's: it dramatizes the culture shock of an individualistic white civilization confronting a communal black one, just as Wiebe's novel dramatizes the culture shock of a communal "native" civilization confronting an individualistic white one. Cawdor's very adaptability, what Todorov identifies as the strength of Western culture, leads to his downfall; while Big Bear's inflexibility, the strength of non-Western cultures, leads to his. Both novels dramatize the waste that results from uncomprehending judgements on the value of another culture's system of values. Wiebe focuses on the imperial arrogance that cannot understand the value of what it has destroyed, while Stow focuses on the internalization of rejection that defines the colonized mind. Both writers show that the colonized cultures are as monocentric as the colonizers. Post-colonial cultures that turn single-mindedly to either one or the other doom themselves to repeat the mistakes of the past. The monocentric leads inevitably to tragedy. The imperial history of cultural encounters has been tragic. But the future for post-colonial cultures need not be — if we can learn the lessons of our pasts and translate them into a heterological discourse in which our founding cultures can meet in dialogue rather than in war.

Their knowledge of history weighs both books with a sense of inevitability. *Visitants* begins with its ending: Saliba recounting Kailusa's discovery of Cawdor's suicide at the public inquiry into his death. The novel then takes the form of five witnesses and the Assistant District Officer trying to make sense of their memories of what happened, recounting the past in the light of their knowl-

edge of its results.⁶ The present continually rewrites the past; looking backward balances looking forward. Wiebe's second historical novel on the Northwest conflicts, *The Scorched-Wood People*, follows a similarly circular format, with the beginning self-consciously recalling the end. And although *The Temptations of Big Bear* follows a more straightforwardly chronological path, moving from 1876 to 1886, its imagery, valuing the circle above the straight line, and privileging predictive visions above European reason, continually questions that linear movement. Where the English and English-Canadians see history in terms of expansion outwards and progress upwards, the Indians and Métis see it as the cyclic repetition of the patterns of the earth: birth, life and death. One metaphor in particular makes this clear in *Big Bear*. Big Bear's fear of the rope around his neck, raised in the novel's first scene, and recalled from time to time throughout the narrative, appearing again at his trial, demonstrates the lack of communication between the two cultures while neatly symbolizing their differences. The tightening circle of the hangman's rope parallels the closing circles of the white intrusion on the Indian way of life and of the narrative that describes that intrusion. These circles bring death instead of life, constraint instead of freedom; this white death-giving ritual destroys the Indian life-giving rituals. Their notion of time as repetition is replaced by the white notion of time as progress. The outsider's naming of experience replaces the insider's, even to the extent of transforming its symbols.

Cawdor understands both notions of time. "Think about the history," he tells himself. "A riddle, but one can guess" (28). Thinking through the natural history into the human, he marvels at the receptivity of the Trobriand Island cosmology that can absorb any change into its scheme of things because it has no room for the individualistic Western question: "What about me?" — a question Cawdor himself cannot evade, even when forcing himself to think through the vast aeons of time that render his own smallness irrelevant.

In Todorov's terms, the superiority of Western culture in dealing with inter-human relations is matched here by the superiority of non-Western cultures in dealing with human relations to the

world. The harmonies of Plains Indian and Trobriand Island cultures have been rudely interrupted by the *tropo agitato* rhythms of a Western impatience with ritual and with the sustaining traditions of the past. Yet neither Wiebe nor Stow make the mistake of idealizing the noble savage, attuned to nature's rhythms as Western man can never be. That version of history is clearly as inadequate as epics praising Western progress. Instead, they take upon themselves the much more difficult task of interrogating the sad historical record of the cultural interactions of these opposites, in search, not of reconciliation, but of creative and equal exchange.

Such a task requires its own discourse to convey its particular perceptions without betrayal. As Wiebe's narrator exclaims in his most important story, "Where is the Voice Coming From?" "the problem is to make the story" (*Angel* 78). Narrative betrays a bias toward end results, grammar subordinates objects to subjects, point of view privileges one perspective above another. To overcome these limitations, both writers employ similar techniques.

First, each provides alternative versions of the same events, provided by witnesses formed by different cultural traditions and with different stakes in the events perceived. When narrated in this fashion, historical "facts" lose their authority, become problematic, irrevocably indebted to prior ideological assumptions for any shape at all. The languages used to register these events further underline their relativity. The official English of a government report clearly limits not only what but also how something may be said; the legal language of the court and the clichés of the journalistic exclude even more. Diaries and letters reveal much more than they explicitly say. As a character in *Big Bear* complains, the traditional English novel *arranges* "the mud" (272) — the material basis of experience, its grounding in issues of survival, creating an illusion of order that masks the lived experience of struggle. By writing the muddiness of mud back in, Wiebe's fiction decolonizes the imperial fictions that misrepresent reality as the colonial experiences it and challenges the privileged dominance of vision among the senses. With Wiebe's mud come renewed sensations of smell, touch and taste, dimensions of cross-

cultural contact abandoned by ethnographers in search of a scientific objectivity.

Second, each novel overturns traditional mental associations, with which European culture is so imbued it thinks them natural. In *Big Bear*, for example, the Indians are linked metaphorically to sunlight, to honesty and to order, while the whites bring darkness, lies and chaos — a decolonizing of the imperial fiction that despite its faults imperialism brought the enlightenment of Christian civilization to benighted natives. In *Visitants*, each culture finds the other's sexual mores shocking. Because the emphasis of the traditional imperial discourse fell on the nakedness and lasciviousness of "native peoples," Stow's emphasis falls on Saliba's horror at the breaking of her culture's taboos that Western dancing enacts. And contrary to romantic European fantasies of primitives living in harmony with nature, Stow makes it clear that in the Trobriand Islands, the native huts are designed to shut out the natural world, all light and air, while the white houses — foolishly, from the local point of view — are open to the ravages of light, wind and sea. No easy equation of native peoples with nature, as opposed to culture, is possible here. Neither is it possible to characterize any culture as monolithic, although both tend to be monocentric in their exclusion of others. Power struggles divide Indians and Trobriand Islanders, even relatives, just as they do whites. A communally oriented society is not therefore a monolithic one; it contains its own pluralities all fighting for a voice.

Third, each novelist introduces a spiritual frame of reference to challenge the rationalist frame that usually dominates historical thinking. In both these novels, religious visions and spiritual experience are taken seriously; the life of the mind and spirit speak as fully as the life of the body. *Big Bear's* dreams speak metaphorically, but they account more authoritatively than the reports of journalists or historians for the defeat of his people. Similarly, in the context established by *Visitants*, black magic seems as plausible a cause for Cawdor's illness as psychological malaise or malaria; visitants from outer space seem as likely in the twentieth century as visitants from Europe must have seemed in the sixteenth. In both novels, through contact with oral cul-

tures, mystery regains an ascendancy in the written word that it had lost for many centuries in the western world. Ritual enactments survive western impatience, proving that their value lies beyond immediate efficacy or observable content. When achievement in the short term is measured against its long-term implications, it loses the authority it has arrogated to itself to name the meaning of events. Most important, both writers are searching for what Bernard Smith calls "the ethical roots of culture" (11). Like him, they know that "A culture cannot live upon other people's universals." Given that Canadian and Australian cultures are ethically dependent and that their histories are the histories of "damaged goods" (14), they seek through direct encounters with that history to discover some way of establishing a "convergent culture" with its ethical roots in local place.

In each text, stylistic innovation works to promote the authors' shared belief that different cultures have much to teach each other. The reader must learn openness to difference and to change through the act of reading these texts, or close them in disgust. It is perhaps no accident that both authors themselves come from the western regions of large countries controlled by remote eastern cities with centralist biases. The celebration of difference enacted in the discordant voices of these texts, voices that will never harmonize into the tidy rhythms of classical European music, challenges all homogenizing tendencies with the most devastating weapon of all — the sheer exuberance of a multifold creativity, to which nothing that lives is alien, in which all life finds a place. Like a Plains Cree council, these texts allow each position a voice; each voice condemns or recommends itself; and from the scattered bits, we readers compose our own visions of the whole, turning as we do so away from these sad pasts toward a new future of our own making.⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Much of this paper has been influenced by Todorov's stimulating formulations. I am grateful to Roger Toumson of the Université des Antilles-Guyane for drawing it to my attention, and to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding to attend the Association of Caribbean Studies Conference where I heard Professor Toumson's own illuminating discussion of Todorov's and other French

theorists' contributions toward formulating a methodology for thinking about post-colonial literatures.

- 2 My thinking here is indebted to Ong, especially his suggestion that "many of the contrasts often made between 'western' and other views seem reducible to contrast between deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness" (29). While I think the word "reducible" oversimplifies an immensely complex relation and while I cannot share his tendency to privilege the "oral" ideal above the "written" reality, I have found his work extremely stimulating. See also his statement that "fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like" (31), and his brief discussion of cargo cults as an illiterate culture's misreading of a literate society (93-94).
- 3 Wiebe writes of his sense of this relation in a famous statement: "To touch this land with roots requires an architectural structure. . . . You must lay great steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and . . . build giant artifacts. No song can do it. . ." ("Passage" 259). Thus Wiebe's working metaphor, in aligning itself with the building of the railroad and spatial structure, pulls against his desire to resurrect a culture that felt no need to "break up that space," a culture content to express itself verbally rather than architecturally, a culture that felt a song *could* do it. For more detailed accounts of language in *The Temptations of Big Bear* see Whaley, Lecker and Grace. I note Grace's statement that this is "not a novel of moral realism that shows the unfair treatment of native peoples; it is a novel that creates a linguistic space between the opposed peoples, forces the reader to occupy that ground, and then batters him from both sides with words. . ." (20).
- 4 For Wiebe's accounts of the research undertaken for *Big Bear*, and of its basis in history, see "Trail" and "Bear Spirit," 132-42 and 143-49. For more detailed analyses of Wiebe's rewriting of history see Howells and Thieme.
- 5 The paradigm here seems to be that established by Adela Qusted's situation in Forster's *A Passage to India*, but this is a subject that demands elaboration elsewhere. I cannot agree, however, with the point of view put forward in Goldie that "the idea of the incubus as sexual nature god seems particularly appropriate in *Big Bear* and in the Canadian context in general" (436).
- 6 The fiction of recorded testimony from the inquiry eventually breaks down as the reader watches Saliba and Benoni recount their versions of the killing of Metusela, something they would never tell a court, and indeed something they assert no one else knows of. No difference is made between what is spoken aloud at the inquiry and the internal thoughts it provokes. By this time, the fiction of the inquiry has served its purpose. It is no longer needed and so dissolves back into its constituent parts, the flow of words, just as the instruments of Cawdor's imaginary composition reconstitute themselves as trees. This is not a flaw, then, but a strength of Stow's attempt to create a fluid form appropriate to the heterological mentality of post-colonial discourse.
- 7 The research and writing of this article were undertaken during a sabbatical year funded by the University of British Columbia and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which awarded me a leave fellowship in 1984-85, for which I am extremely grateful.

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