

*Fiction, Break, Silence: Language.*  
*Sheila Watson's "The Double Hook"*

MARGARET E. TURNER

A PARTICULAR QUALITY in the literature of North America arrests the attention of the serious reader. It has to do with language and with resolutions which I believe stem from the transplanting of the European from a fixed structure to an open setting where custom, structure, and language do not exist. George Grant calls this the break from Europe:

All of us who came made some break in that coming. The break was not only the giving up of the old and the settled, but the entering into the majestic continent which could not be ours in the way that the old had been. It could not be ours in the old way because the making of it ours did not go back before the beginning of conscious memory. The roots of some communities in eastern North America go back far in continuous love for their place, but none of us can be called autochthonous, because in all there is some consciousness of making the land our own. . . .

That conquering relation to place has left its mark within us. When we go into the Rockies we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did. (17)

The new world presents itself as a moral and metaphysical predicament, with the imperative of retaining or replacing givens, of accommodating the content of different histories into a relationship with each other while maintaining a delicate balance in a world that threatens to disintegrate under the extreme pressure of that activity. The existential need to be someone somewhere is aggravated in a new world that is a non-place, an invisible world with invisible people in it. There is a loss in the migration from

Europe, and a discontinuity between the lives lived there and those lived here. One loses history; one loses memory. The greatest loss, however, is the loss of language.

To move from Canada as nowhere to Canada as somewhere involves finding a language. Images of the world sustained by language are de-authenticated in the new setting: the words and ways of seeing from the old world do not work here. History and society, the historical and the social, have no referent. The new-world experience carries a burden of silence, of philosophical anxiety, that cannot be removed by the eliminating strangeness in the form of either Indian or landscape. This new world is, for the European, haunted by absence. Its literature is hunted by it — seeks it out. Canadian literature begins with this absence and the necessity of salvaging from it a kind of presence. Necessarily, this is an activity of language, *in* language.

The loss of language in the new world is critical because it is, of course, the basis of literature. The peopling of the new world is a zero zone — an unattached, floating state disconnected from the old world yet unconnected to the new. This zero zone of removed existence is charged with questions of structure, of meaning, of what it is central for a culture to know; it finds a reflection in what we can call a zero zone of literature. This zero zone in a literature must, in turn, reflect a zero moment of *language* in which the silence that accompanies a migrant suspension between cultures yields a zero degree<sup>1</sup> of humanity itself. The language of this zero zone is, strictly speaking, silence. Not until this silence is perceived for what it is — a kind of naming — can a language appropriate for speaking of it become possible. We have — a double hook.

A silence of this kind underlies the literature of Canada, and Sheila Watson addresses it directly in *The Double Hook*. *The Double Hook* is an activity of language reflexively moving in on its own energies, moving out from them along channels of liturgy and ritual, floating inside a medium, a surround, of silence. The silence is physical, emotional, theological, eventually metaphysical. It invades character and event; it saturates words and dampens reference and resonance.

Why is *The Double Hook* so unusual in this way? And why is it, in spite of this unusualness, so authentic — as the contributors to George Bowering's collection of critical essays seem to agree? Because *The Double Hook* is an archetypal North American fiction and the archetypal Canadian fiction of this strange estranged space where allegory, symbol, and language float with such self-consciousness. This is why it is a very important book — one that awakens echoes, teases out memories, builds uncommon images, and uninvents the world.

Watson hides meaning in words, evokes a picture of a landscape without describing it, allows events and actions to be apprehended as much by what is not on the page as by what is:

James was at the top of the stairs. His hand half-raised. His voice in the rafters.

James walking away. The old lady falling. There under the jaw of the roof. In the vault of the bed loft. Into the shadow of death. Pushed by James's will. By James's hand. By James's words: This is my day. You'll not fish today. (*Double Hook* 19)

What she does say is little more reassuring. She links her evocation of setting and atmosphere to Coyote as cause in a landscape eyed with his spittle (22), and shows a physical world shifting, insubstantial, unravelling into strangeness and abstraction: "Roads went from this to that. But the hill led up to the pines and on to the rock rise which flattened out and fell off to nowhere on the other side" (33). All is not as it appears: a cow throws the shadow of a rabbit, a dead woman fishes, water rises in drought. Perception cannot be trusted and explanations are absent: the uneasy sense of the mysterious that defies attempts at definition but demands a response continues throughout the work. Meaning floats in and out of grasp with Coyote's voice, where Watson centres the strangeness of the world. The refusal of explicit structure is constant; the pressure to find insight intense.

A useful point of access to Watson's thought and to the central concerns of the work is the passage where Ara comes down from the hills after seeing the water rise and must "tell someone what she felt about the old lady and the water" (33). Watson works with the intensities of eternity, infinity, apocalypse. Everything in

the book is part of a circle of association; this internal tension of reference establishes the work's power and distances it from realism. Watson moves into an abstract setting that leads the reader into a universe of mystery:

Beyond James over the slant of the ground Ara saw the path down to the creek. The path worn deep by horses' feet. And higher up on the far side she saw the old lady, the branches wrapped like weeds above her head, dropping her line into the stream.

She saw and motioned with her hand.

Kip's eyes looked steadily before him.

Your old lady's down to Wagners' he said to James.

She's here, Ara said.

James turned on his heel. But when he turned, he saw nothing but the water-hole and the creek and the tangle of branches which grew along with it.

Ara went down the path, stepping over the dried hoof-marks down to the creek's edge. She, too, saw nothing now except a dark ripple and the padded imprint of a coyote's foot at the far edge of the moving water.

She looked up the creek. She saw the twisted feet of the cottonwoods shoved naked into the stone bottom where the water moved, and the matted branches of the stunted willow. She saw the shallow water plocking over the roots of the cottonwood, transfiguring bark and stone.

She bent towards the water. Her fingers divided it. A stone breathed in her hand. Then life drained to its centre.

And in a loud voice

Coyote cried:

Kip, my servant Kip.

Startled by the thunder, Ara dropped the stone into the water.

... Kip's face was turned to the sky. To the light stampeded together and bawling before the massed darkness. The white bulls of the sky shoulder to shoulder.

He had risen in his stirrups until the leathers were pulled taut. His hand reaching to pull down the glory.

Ara looked up too. For a minute she saw the light. Then only the raw skin of the sky drawn over them like a sack. (35-36)

The landscape here slants, is slightly askew: the earth is not stable. The hooves of horses — solid, material objects — become

insubstantial: the herd we neither see nor hear has worn deep grooves into the earth. Up on the far side of the creek, out of reach, is the old lady. The branches are wrapped like weeds not around but above her head, pulling up echoes of the snakes of Medusa and monsters which rise not from a shallow creek but from the sea. She drops her line into the stream: an unChrist-like fishing, demanding answers.

Ara saw: the verb is repeated to emphasize the act of seeing. She makes a silent motion with her hand; no one *sees*. Kip's eyes catch the striped stones and the bugs and the glory in the moon, but not the movement of Ara. Strangely, he does not see the old lady across the creek either, even though he has come to tell James that "she's down to Wagners'." Ara's interjected "She's here" suddenly cracks open the silence, after she enters the yard without being seen or heard. James "started round" and again "turned on his heel" to catch a glimpse of the things that keep creeping up behind him, but too late. He sees nothing but the apparently natural phenomena of water, sky, creek — the creek that he is afraid he may be knocked over by to drown, alone, in an inch of water. The tangle of branches that cannot be penetrated but may hide the old lady, the tangle of meanings that cannot be comprehended but may hide truth, the tangle of words that makes these people distrust speech — all are drawn into the aura of association.

Ara steps over and around the hoofmarks that are baked into the dried earth, looking for sure footing and finding none. She sees the coyote's footprint in the earth where she expected the old lady's — was it Coyote or Mrs. Potter who walked here? Can human being be metamorphosed? The water is not still but moving: the old lady or the coyote/Coyote — are they one or many? — the same or separate? — could well have slipped into it and been carried away. She looks up the creek towards its source, to which the old lady is always moving. The water is not deep enough to sustain the life of the stunted willows or to flow through drought. Ara can see through the water to the creekbed and watch the bark of the roots and stone of the creekbed being transformed. Again, form can change, vision can be distorted,

perception can trick. The deadness of bark and stone comes alive under the mysterious force of the water.

That water pulls Ara. She bends toward it; her fingers divide and pass into it. The stones under the water have been given life: in her hand a stone breathes. Ara is at the edge of meaning and Watson tantalizes with its closeness, setting up expectations that Ara will be the source of vision in the work. However, she is not. She catches a glimpse and “[T]hen life drained to its centre” when Coyote cries, but only for Kip. Ara is not ready for the revelation. She is startled by the thunder and drops the stone; the vision retreats.

Kip has heard Coyote and looks to the sky where the light and darkness are disturbed by the storm that Ara, in her probing, has caused. The sky is alive with stampeding and bawling cattle, the white bulls of the sky who fill it, shoulder to shoulder, as men would stand. Kip rises in his stirrups to grasp the glory which only he can see, a glory which is tied to Coyote, the unnatural phenomena, and the supernatural animals. The glory also marks the severe disturbance of the world, reminiscent of the crucifixion. Ara follows Kip's gaze and for a moment she too catches a glimpse of the light before the raw skin of the living sky is pulled down, pinning them and their vision to the earth. The people of Nineveh are trapped, blind, in a shapeless sack. Watson makes the skin of the sky raw and painful, like the scraped roots, like the nakedness and vulnerability of the people before the eyes of the old lady and the voice of Coyote.

*The Double Hook* is filled with passages charged in this way. Watson's greatest achievement is in the energy that crackles out of the text when these intersections occur. Then the language becomes very tense, highly formalized, and almost fractured as words are pressed and compressed to include every possible association and suggestion of meaning. Paradoxically, the movement is toward nonmeaning. The language itself neither contains nor controls meaning — its capacity to generate suggestions of significance is inexhaustible. Watson inscribes apocalyptic resonances into the text and then invites the reader to apprehend what is at stake. To the extent that speech may be a defining criterion of the human she pulls it into that minimal zero point of human

existence. In this way she traces what leads a human being from firm fixed ground into the unknown with its promise of revelation and threat of annihilation. Language is stripped, convoluted; it continues to shock by juxtaposing images that are clear, yet curiously intangible. We cannot tell dream from reality.

The scope of Watson's ambition in *The Double Hook* is broad: ultimate questions, the ambivalence of all things, the relationship of human beings to truth. Nothing is known: all things that were known no longer have the signature of knowledge. Watson is documenting the emergence of consciousness and language in an unfamiliar world closer to our interior, moral realities than we realized. Moments of intense and strained language like this occur at intervals throughout the work. At these intersections of significance she builds meaning.

Watson's concern with the base structure of human existence comes into focus with Coyote and the parrot, both of whom have usurped a defining characteristic of human beings — the ability to speak. While Coyote is a supernatural creature with undefined powers — the trickster of Indian mythology — the parrot is simply a parrot, and oddly enough, the only real character in the book.<sup>2</sup> The parrot almost explodes *The Double Hook*: the fact that it *speaks* threatens the structure of the work and its meaning — the notion of an absurd world and of human kind under siege. The boundaries between human and animal disintegrate.

The parrot speaks, but its words come from the furthest edge of meaning:

It was the parrot who noticed James and Traff first. It raised a foot.

Drinks all round, it said, falling from Paddy's shoulder to the counter and sidling along. . . .

The parrot swung itself below the inside edge of the counter and came up with a tin mug in one claw.

Drinks on you, it said. . . .

James looked up. The parrot seemed to be watching him over the rim of its mug.

She was old, James said, speaking to the parrot. (100-01)

The idea of human beings *being human* is threatened by the parrot's connection to that humanity, as it is by Coyote's connec-

tion to the supernatural. Both defy definition and placement. As a result, both threaten the structure of existence.

The intensity of Watson's attention to language extends to the way the characters communicate with each other. Coyote's bewitching of nature and his spell over the old lady and Kip are tied to the silence that has settled over the community. Watson shows a distorted world in which words have lost meaning and rituals are empty of significance: "This is the way they'd lived. Suspended in silence. When they spoke they spoke of hammers and buckles, of water for washing, of rotted posts, of ringbone and distemper" (43). As well as denying a common doctrinal background Watson denies ritual, the human response to ambivalence (Fletcher 343), by making it unavailable. The entire community is trapped between silence and meaningless sound with the Widow who calls on God while denying communication and contact: "Dear God, she cried. Then she stopped short. Afraid that he might come" (55). Only Angel appears to realize that although people retain their individuality in community — "I never knew men you could nail together like boards" (86) — individual strength need not mean withdrawal and silence.

Watson uses Felix to represent the spiritual regeneration of the community and the coming of language. He discovers meaning and brings significance and sacredness back into human speech: in him the almost forgotten echoes of the mass, one of the traditions built into the rhythms of speech in the valley, resound. Felix is surrounded by a strange, blessed peace, alone with his dogs and dreams and in silence save for his fiddle. His curious stasis is framed by the language and memory of half-forgotten ritual:

The cup which Angel had put into his hand, her bitter going, he'd left untouched. Left standing. A something set down. No constraint to make him drink. No struggle against the drinking. No let-it-pass. No it-is-done. Simply redeemed. Claiming before death a share of his inheritance. (38)

Watson places on Felix's dreams, words, and actions the significance of Christ's words on the cross and the bitter cup of Gethsemane. His blessed peace threatens to become the isolation of the damned, however, as he realizes his isolation, which Watson keys to the absence of words:

I've got no words to clear a woman off my bench. No words except: Keep moving, scatter, get-the-hell out.

His mind sifted ritual phrases. Some half forgotten. You're welcome. Put your horse in. Pull up. *Ave Maria. Benedictus fructus ventris. Introibo.*

Introibo. The beginning. The whole thing to live again. His father knowing them by heart. God's servants. The priest's servants. The cup lifting. The bread breaking. *Domine non sum dignus.* Words coming. The last words.

He rolled from his chair. Stood barefoot. His hands raised.

*Pax vobiscum,* he said.

The girl lifted her head. She licked the saliva from the corner of her mouth.

What the hell, she said.

Go in peace, he said. . . . He'd had his say. Come to the end of his saying. He put a stick on the fire. There was nothing he could do. (51)

Again Watson calls up the echoes of the mass, the annunciation, the eucharist, the last words of the last supper, but changes their meaning by their juxtaposition to "get-the-hell out" and "Put your horse in," the now-standard ritual phrases. Felix's mixture of litany is nonsense. He comes to the end of his saying, trapped tragically in words that should mean but do not.

The mixture of words and images in his dreams, coupled with Lenchen's need, begins to bring him to an awareness of the world. In his dreams and memories — "I mustn't forget, he thought, I mustn't forget" (68) — he begins to relate the fragments of ritual to meaning in his life. He comes alive, haunted by the imperative of speaking, struggling to remember what words to say and what they mean: "What could he say, Felix thought. All the way up the road he'd been trying to form the words" (78). He speaks to Angel first in the words of blessings and forgiveness, and then in his own words of need. His transformation is complete at the birth of the child when he is metamorphosed, but unlike the old lady, into life rather than death. Watson brings Felix into speech and the community into life with the birth of the child, and then she defuses the intensity of the text by having Felix retreat from his newly-awakened spirituality into practicality as he assumes responsibility for feeding the people in his house.

For Felix this is a significant movement out of stasis into reality, but it signals a break in the text. Watson has determined that the meaning of language holds the final resolution, yet she ends the work with Coyote's words claiming credit for the child:

I have set his feet on soft ground; I have set his feet on the sloping shoulders of the world. (134)

She undercuts the new world by Coyote's speech and James's continuing denial of memory and speech (126-27). Instead of the powerful and creative joining that James's and Lenchen's union could have been, only shadows of the past tradition hover, offering no strength or basis for a renewed ritual or meaning. Watson tries to effect a new significance by having Coyote's voice consecrate the young saviour, but she leaves questions floating in an ambiguity that may well be essentially Canadian (Kroetsch and Bessai 215). With the loss of their rituals, native and European, the people have lost their protection against the environment. The land, which Watson implies can be Eden or hell, is fierce and destructive because there is nothing to mediate between it and the people there. They are indeed figures in a ground from which they cannot be separated — they have been infected with the sterility and aridity of the hills around them.

What happens to people without language, without ritual, without a religion of beauty, without a sense of the sacred? Watson lists the choices: violence, insensibility, stasis, invisibility, silence. Shadows float through a landscape that is darkened during the day and suffused with light at night. Those shadows are what human beings have become — no more substantial than the vague shadows of cups lifting and bread breaking or of Felix when he sheds his flesh and delivers his namesake. The rituals that were once the basis of human meaning have been neutralized by time and displacement: they no longer function as either articulation or defence. They require time, history, and continuity, and they are simply absent in an unestablished society. When people lose their rituals they lose their balance — the distinction between metaphysical and material blurs — and their language as well. Watson's community is in a condition of deconstructed

language. The clichés that saved both face and time when common meanings were understood now damn: they obstruct human communication and drive people further into themselves and silence. The language the hill people use does not resolve itself but hides meanings in crevices and allows words to be used as walls and weapons.

In *The Double Hook* Watson deals with the problem of distinction between people and place, between meaning and non-meaning. She also addresses the question of language — both for her characters and for literature in Canada. If the words used to articulate the relationship to place and to people are not authentic registers of consciousness, the literature cannot sustain legitimate meaning. Finding the right words requires a contract between the individual and experience, something that is not always as straightforward in this country as one might assume. Canadians are attempting to live within their own experience while absorbing a history that teaches that the experience of elsewhere is our own. But that cannot and does not work. The denial of *here* and the demand that the alien experience *there* replace it, even though *there* does not exist for us, is an impossible condition for a social construct or a literature to bear. It does not matter a great deal what Joyce said of Ireland or Woolf of England — the country stands, secure enough in its grounding, aware enough of its history, certain enough of the memories that give it meaning. As Stanley Cavell puts it, and we can read North America as his reference, “before there was Russia, there was Russia; before there was France and England, there was France and England; but before there was America there was no America. America was *discovered* . . .” (344). It does matter, desperately, what Watson or Klein or Macpherson say of Canada because the concept of the country may not be able to bear the radical questioning of reason, meaning, and tradition. In Canada the stress of the transition to the new world lays bare raw nerves — the memory of trauma, the knowledge that “my country” is somewhere else. Perhaps, as Robert Kroetsch says, the fiction does make us real (“Conversation” 63): Watson has come very close in *The Double Hook* to making us real, authentic, legitimate inhabitants of this land.

Kroetsch calls the process of finding a language and uncovering structures “unhiding the hidden” (“Unhiding the Hidden”). This is exactly what Watson does in *The Double Hook*. Rather than mythologizing Watson demythologizes — she undoes the Latin liturgy and puts the words of the Psalms in the mouth of an animal. Watson comes very close to an absurdist, silent world where human existence is little more than the repetitions of Estragon and Vladimir. She shows the possibility, necessity, and method of unnamings, but she refuses to reduce the proposition to nothing: she disintegrates the world but stops before she reaches what might or might not furnish the meaning it needs to be rebuilt. Her language is extremely tense and controlled when she approaches the parrot and Coyote because it is here that the threat to the structuring principles of humanness is most real and her questioning threatens to totally unravel the world. With the descent from speech comes the descent from humanness, which Watson is unwilling to follow. *The Double Hook* constantly oscillates between the grasp and loss of meaning, between the authentication of words and the retreat into the language of the old world to redress and counterbalance the confusion. The human mind demands explanations. Those explanations are very difficult to catch and hold in Watson’s world.

*The Double Hook* necessarily leaves one uneasy about the world the hill people inhabit and about one’s own world, about the nature of human being that Canada allows and supports. The North American necessity of assembling a new order is really a very radical act of creation because it involves not simply the supplanting but the *uncreating* of a previous experience. Canada’s order has been built on the uneasy compromise between old and new, the unwillingness to substitute, and the horrible dread of being left with nothing. North America is haunted by a sense of absence — in Canada it is expressed in the eternal problematic of culture and identity — and the anxiety that without a structure of meaning, however invalid, the image of the human may disappear. The writer on this continent is in a peculiar position because, if the role of transmitting the past to the present and future is accepted, a past must be found, within the writer’s or

someone else's experience, or in the imagination. Existing in the absence of memory involves unfixeness, uncertainty about the validity of one's own existence. The absence of language is a yet further remove.

Watson avoids the distinct historical and social framework to which the Canadian imagination is so often leased and the public language so frequently used. She refuses to posit Canada as a secure social structure with eternity in place. It is impossible for anyone outside *The Double Hook* to walk the valley as if it is the universe, but peculiarly that is exactly what Watson's figures do. The world-in-itself phenomenon is not the condition of Canada, but some things in *The Double Hook* very nearly are. Watson strips the work of all surface level conventions, lets the world float, and makes the setting nowhere, demanding recognition of the silence and invisibility that surround the experience of Canada. She realizes that it is necessary to maintain the authentic meaning of words or risk everything, that the limits of language are indeed the limits of the world (Wittgenstein, qtd. Thody 15). Ultimately, inauthentic meanings destroy a culture more finally than silence ever could. Watson's language is not referential, but with it she creates a world that was not previously visible and that cannot usually be seen in Canada or in Canadian literature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Watson used this term in an interview with me in February 1982.

<sup>2</sup> The parrot lived in a hotel in the Cariboo that became the setting for *The Double Hook*.

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