

Ernest Buckler's
"The Mountain and the Valley" and
"That Dangerous Supplement . . ."

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Ernest Buckler once said this about the craft of writing: When you accomplish a bit that reads as if, brother, *that* must have been something hard to get expressed, don't stick your thumbs in your galluses and gloat. Spend another hour or day, on it — until it sounds as if, hell, anyone could do that. (Cook 24)

THIS ATTEMPT to reconcile perfectionistic finish with a rough-hewn egalitarianism — "hell *anyone* could do that" — marks not only Buckler's style, but also his plot and themes in *The Mountain and the Valley*. David Canaan is isolated by his distinctive relation to language, in a community where people's "feelings weren't word-shaped" like his (156). He, like Buckler, longs to transcend his awkward relation to language, not by abandoning words, but by making his artificial use of them seem natural, rather than worked over. That *Buckler's* style seems often to fall short of both his own and David's standards has troubled many critics, but Warren Tallman summed up the problem best in 1960: "Buckler has no compositional key except maximum intensity. Sentence after sentence is forced to a descriptive pitch which makes the novel exceptionally wearing to read" (qtd. in Cook 62). Until 1970, however, when Gerald Noonan picked up the issue in "Egoism and Style in *The Mountain and the Valley*," no one had really focused on the problem. Noonan's thesis is that Buckler's "overwrought verbiage" engenders the novel's "structural and interpretative disharmony" (68). Although Noonan's article is perceptive, not everyone finds interpretive disharmony bad: lately critics have been flocking to gaps, ruptures

and contradictions like tourists to the edge of the Grand Canyon. If writing is equated with wallpapering over the holes in the plaster, an attempt to cover up the cracks and gaps resulting from unresolved and possibly unresolvable ideological struggles, then disharmony, like struggle, becomes part of life and writing, and thus inevitable, ubiquitous and constant. Jacques Derrida has taught us to peel off the wallpaper and take the building apart at the cracks in order to reveal the faulty workmanship that underlies our most profound beliefs.

In a chapter of *Of Grammatology* entitled “. . . That Dangerous Supplement . . .” Derrida discusses Rousseau’s problems with language, problems that are similar to Buckler’s. Although Rousseau values speech above writing, it is speech as it “should have been”: “In the *Confessions*, when Jean-Jacques tries to explain how he became a writer, he describes the passage to writing as the restoration, by a certain absence and by a sort of calculated effacement, of presence disappointed of itself in speech. To write is indeed the only way of keeping or recapturing speech since speech denies itself as it gives itself” (141-42).

As Derrida points out, “the operation that substitutes writing for speech also replaces presence by value: to the *I am* or to the *I am present* thus sacrificed, a *what I am* or a *what I am worth* is preferred. I renounce my present life, my present and concrete existence in order to make myself known in the ideality of truth and value” (142). Writing is a substitute for living. Derrida notes that the writing life is a kind of “literary suicide” where “the greatest sacrifice aim[s] at the greatest symbolic reappropriation of presence” (142-43). One is reminded of David’s desire to save things, to make them last, particularly the experience of climbing the mountain: “Let’s wait. I can be near the mountain and save it at the same time” (28).

The mountain, in fact, comes to mean “presence” in the novel. For Anna, who climbs it with Toby just before he leaves to be killed in the war, “It seemed as if this minute on the top of the mountain they’d been climbing to was the peak of her whole life” (269), but the experience lasts only a minute. For David the mountain is presence too, and the vision of the perfect writing it brings kills him:

As he thought of telling these things exactly, all the voices came close about him. . . . It wouldn't be necessary to take them one by one. That's where he'd been wrong. All he'd have to do . . . oh, it was so gloriously simple . . . was to find their single core of meaning. . . . He didn't consider *how* he would find it. (The words he'd put in the scribbler before now had never fallen smooth over the shape of the remembrance, or enclosed it all. But the minute he put the scribbler away the perfect ones seemed surely possible to be found the next time.) (298-99)

Clearly, David's vision of the perfect words is delusive. Only too late does David realize that “*It was always someone else* that things happened to . . .” (274). He has lived in a world of postponement and deferral, based on the premise of a future greatness that never comes to redeem the waste. At the point of his death, David still believes he can reappropriate everything, including his lost relationships in his community, in an act of writing — in becoming “the greatest writer in the whole world” (299). Then, as Douglas Barbour sardonically puts it, “Well, at least he dies happy” (74).

David Canaan fails as a writer because of his alienation from his community and his audience: “the seed of it had always been there, even when he was at the hub of fellowship with others” (228). Barbour's “David Canaan: The Failing Heart” reads the novel “as a study of David's self-imposed isolation as man and artist,” focusing on David's egocentrism and his vindictive wounding of those he loves (66). His isolation can also be traced to another level: the sexual. David's failure also seems to stem from a deep-seated sexual shame that attaches itself to language.

While Toby and Anna climb the mountain in the final celebration of their marriage, David settles down alone to write: “Every so often he must milk his mind like this. If he didn't, it felt fetid with the decay of infant ideas, born with all their features but never freed to breath . . . or else dry and rattling with their bones, like the skeletons of beetles cocooned in the corner of the window sash” (260). When on his return Toby reads a line or two, “David grabbed the sheet from his hand almost savagely. If Toby read what he'd written, he thought he'd die. The whole thing seemed unutterably shameful” (263). He burns the story. The boy David finds a “private excitement” over the words of

his part in the play, which he refuses to say for anyone except his twin sister Anna (57).¹ He thinks of them "when he took the brand new Reader in a room by himself and passed his fingers over the scooped-out lettering on the bright covers and there'd be a delicious guilt as he read the words in it, as if even reading might soil the wonderfully sleek pages" (58). Thus speaking, reading, and writing are all implicated in a sexual guilt — reading and writing especially, because they are private pleasures.

In *The Cruellest Month*, Buckler's symposium novel, two comments make the connection clear. Morse Halliday, a successful American writer, "Asked why he had no new book lately . . . replied 'It was a nasty habit. Haven't you boys ever heard it can drive you crazy, or blind?'" (54). Another character finds talking about herself a release: "like that habit boys discover" (156). For Rousseau, writing as supplement to speech is outside nature, unnatural, and thus dangerous to health, as is masturbation. Derrida explains: "The supplement that 'cheats' maternal 'nature' operates as writing, and as writing it is dangerous to life. This danger is that of the image. Just as writing opens the crisis of the living speech in terms of its 'image,' its painting or its representation, so onanism announces the ruin of vitality in terms of imaginary seductions" (151). Writing is here connected with forbidden sexual pleasure, yet presumably some writing can be equated with legitimate and mature sexuality too, as we shall see.

David, however, only has intimations of what a satisfactory seduction of either woman or audience might be like. Ultimately, he engages in "imaginary seductions" of both girls and women and of readers: "He planned it feverishly, lying there. He planned Effie's part as well as his own, the way he always planned the other's too when the other wasn't present. He made it as real as fact" (101). Goaded by the boys and his own pride into making love to Effie he goes to find her as if condemned. He thinks of the imaginary girl or woman "he'd seen in a magazine or heard about in a story. . . . His body would respond instantly then." But if he is with a real girl, "the suddenly added dimension of her *presence* would expose and cripple his desire. He wished he could do it with Effie as if somehow she wasn't there" (107, my italics). This passage is strongly reminiscent of Rousseau's frustration that

he “only felt the full strength of” his attachment to his beloved when he “no longer saw her” (qtd. in Derrida 152).

When Effie, to David’s astonishment, agrees to be seduced he then receives a vision of what love is like. Before, it had “been only a word.” Words are deceptive. But “now, all at once, it was like a page that had had only the blind side turned to you. When you picked it up and turned it over, there was the meaning, written plain and alive. It lay warm in your hand” (110). Here reading and sexual love are linked positively, but the experience of love is the primary term of the metaphor, not the writing. This first experience with Effie is as selfish as Barbour implies: David can only think of her as part of himself: “She was like a part of himself that had slipped away where he could never again be able to watch it all the time. It might be hurt without his knowing it — beyond the cure of being brought back inside and thoroughly apprehended” (113). But the inverse of this is writing. After his fall David reads a book and experiences “the flooding shock of hearing things stated exactly for the first time”; he concludes “there was only one way to possess anything: to *say* it exactly. Then it would be outside you, captured and conquered” (195). Unlike a woman, writing can be controlled. It can be read and reread and it stays the same. It is a part of self that stays, or so David believes, under the control of the self. To retain control, however, David cannot let the writing find any reader but him. Thinking of the war story that he destroyed before Toby could misread it, David finds it safer to keep it inside himself, where he is its perfect reader: “David reread the story off his mind. The validity crept back into it all over again” (264).

Thus Effie is supplanted almost instantly by the arrival of Toby’s letter: “He didn’t know why, but the complex magic a letter held for him erased the simple magic of what he’d done with Effie almost utterly. She had that sudden anaemia of meaning a puzzle he’d been putting together would have, or the supper dishes, or a sock his mother had partly knit, when he opened the door and saw them again, after the Magic Lantern show in the schoolhouse” (114). Such is the power of the imaginary to supplant the real. And what displaces Effie is not Toby’s presence but his letter. Writing can be “devoured privately, uncomplicated

by the exactions of the writer's face" (114). Even when David finds Toby's clumsy sentences devoid of a message, he still feels that "this was some kind of turning point in his life" (115).

Writing is a way to the control and power he cannot find elsewhere. But this discovery of power is at odds with another: writing is never exact: "the never-quite exactness of the twinning of thing and word for it was so tantalizing . . . [it was like an] unmanageable dream" (201). Even David's own supposedly unproblematic presence is twinned in Anna, who leaves him. Indeed, Buckler is clearly playing with the analogy between the writer and the reader, and the lover and the loved one. Ideally, they should be one. If they must be double, the closest analogy is twins. But marriage between twins is forbidden, impossible, as is, ultimately, David's dream of the perfect, because perfectly controlled writing. Buckler, in fact, makes it clear that it is precisely the imperfection of writing, its inability to encompass everything, its supplementarity, that is the source of the pleasure and the guilt:

If he took the voices one at a time, his listening could trace sharp and clear every vein of their story. And yet some unquenchable leaven in the mind's thirst kept sending it back for the taste of complete realization it just missed. . . . The mere *presence* of the objects about him was like a kind of accusation. . . . The swarming multitude of all the voices it was physically impossible to attend to gave him a sense of exquisite guilt. (291)

This uncontrollable and "unmanageable dream" of writing afflicts him over and over again: "he felt the excitement he always felt when the crust of an idea was first broken, when the first sentence lay outside him. But, as always, one sentence accomplished didn't leave that much less to be told. The idea fronded suddenly like a million-capillaried chart of the bloodstream. He felt the panic of having to encompass every bit of it" (260). Buckler, like other writers in the twentieth century, finds no final voice, no sure presence to which to attach writing. This discovery is guilty because the writer plays God, or God's scribe, while fearing no such presence exists. Writing, as Derrida puts it, is no longer simply "the insubstantial double of a major signifier"; now there is less and less with which to pin it down, to stop its free play (7). Finally, the writer is simply playing with himself.

For Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, this discovery is a delightful liberation. For Buckler, it is the discovery of a taboo and thus, the death of writing.

Buckler shows David tormented by the proliferation of alternate voices every time he writes: there is no one voice that takes over to drown out his horrible suspicion that all he is writing down is his own invention. On the mountain, however, David does manage to stop the voices twice. What stops them the first time is his discovery that “he was at the very top of the mountain” (297). Presence rescues him from infinite and unstoppable possibility. The second thing that stops the infinite forking of voices is his thought that “all” he needs to do is “find their single core of meaning” (298) and write a novel that would speak for his family and his community:

Even my father and my mother and all the others who are gone will know somehow, somewhere, that I have given an absolving voice to all the hurts they gave themselves or each other — hurts that were caused only by the misreading of what they couldn’t express. (300)

The single core he needs to find here is the voice of his people. On the mountain, amid unrealistic thoughts of becoming “the greatest writer in the whole world,” he remembers a childhood experience:

(Once, while he was still in school, he had composed a petition from all the men in the village, asking the government for a daily mail. When he read it back to them they heard the voice of their own reason speaking exactly in his. Their warm wonder at his little miracle of finding the words for it that they themselves couldn’t find, or recognize for the words of their own thoughts until they heard him speak them, made him and them so fluid together that it worked in him like a kind of tears.) (298)

Significantly, this experience is only recounted in retrospect, and in parentheses. For David, these tears are a “warm crying of acquittal” (300). Through writing he can find absolution for the guilt he feels for the harm he has done his family and his community in his thoughts, actions, and with his scathing tongue. During the school play as a child he had felt the same unity with a community from which he generally feels alienated: “When

all the stray scraps in the door yard had been gathered into one pile, the flame roared through them, melting and levelling them, gathering up all their separate piecefulness into one great uniform consummation" (82). Both these experiences of his feeling of community conclude in melting or burning; the writer dissolves into his community in a collective orgasm that is not shameful. This is the role of the writer, in Romantic terms, and I suspect, in Buckler's: to obliterate himself in becoming the "voice of the people." In this role, writing is speaking, and a speech that is far more powerful than one person's alone. Here writing shifts from private to public, from "overwrought verbiage" to anyone's speech, from shame to virtue. This is how David dreams of writing on the mountain, although the only writing he has actually done has been focused on himself and his own concerns.²

Buckler often describes David as one who seems to have the ability to become a communal writer, or in Romantic terms, a great poet: "in a group, his private part was sucked suddenly inward, like rags of smoke by a draft. None of it showed, to make a strangeness with the others. It didn't nag him for release. He could be with them then, immediately, more immediately than any two of *them* could be together by themselves" (103). Despite his difference from them, he can speak for them, apparently in a way that they can accept. But his own selfish concerns clearly taint his writing about them, and his choice of what to write is clearly, given the infinite possibility of what he *might* say, arbitrary.

This view of writing as a communal act requiring the dissolution of the individuality of the poet has a long critical history, dating from Romanticism. For the Romantic critic, the *Volksgeist* or spirit of the people, was a metaphysical entity that produced and gave validity to an entire culture (Minogue 57). Most critical assumptions about national literature are derived from Romantic nationalist ideas, and Canadian criticism is no exception. Archibald Lampman argued that great literature is only produced when "the passion and enthusiasm of an entire people, carried away by the excitement of some great crisis, enters into the soul of one man specially gifted" (qtd. in Brown 19). Northrop Frye praises E. J. Pratt in just these terms: "When the poet

has so central a relation to his society, there is no break between him and his audience: he speaks for, as much as to, his audience, and his values are their values. Even if a professional poet, he is popular in the sense that he is the voice of his community” (186-87).

Buckler, too, still clings to the last hope of many Canadian writers — that he will capture the authentic voice that marks his community, an essentialist and idealist quest as impossible as the similar quest for the elusive Canadian identity. He comes close only with the help of a massive irony that several critics have noticed: he writes the novel that David cannot. The close identification between David and Buckler that Noonan sees as a weakness marks Buckler’s own realization that he is “faking” an impossible feat. Claude Bissell notes of Buckler’s style that “one feels that the search for the word has become an end in itself” (xi). W. J. Keith comments that David’s “failed” style is “indistinguishable from the narrative that contains it,” and “lay[s] undue emphasis on the artifice of *The Mountain and the Valley*” (148). These comments focus on the wrinkles in the wallpaper that cannot cover the cracks of an ideological tension endemic to Western thought. Buckler’s suspicion that the invocation of presence, the attempt at transparently perfect writing, is impossible, means that the only model that he could write about his “people” is one that shows a writer failing to write such a novel. Anything else would be deceptive.³

NOTES

- 1 See John Moss, *Ancestral Voices: Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977) 90-94, on the sexual triangle of Toby, Anna and David, and its hints of homosexuality and incest.
- 2 One begins “Roger was angry with his brother” (196) and the other is about a “sick” boy who’d “never been anywhere” (260) — obviously about himself and his jealousy of Toby.
- 3 I would like to thank the participants in the Badlands Conference for their helpful questions and comments. Smaro Kamboureli pointed out that Ellen, unlike David, does finish *her* work of art, her text(ile), a transformation of castoff clothes into a hooked rug. I hope to incorporate some discussion on the difference between male and female concepts of writing in Buckler and other Canadian writers into a longer paper on Regionalism and Incest. I also thank Don McLulich for his comments on my early draft, and Larry Matthews for showing me his article in manuscript.

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