

THE MATTER OF PERCEPTION
IN THE FICTION OF W.O. MITCHELL

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A THESIS
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at
Sir George Williams University
Montreal, Canada

September, 1974

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ABSTRACT

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The fiction of W.O. Mitchell appears to carry the burden of a protracted concern with the matter of perception. In Who has seen the wind, an innocent protagonist matures to the point that he is confounded by a postlapsarian world which he struggles to comprehend intellectually and emotionally. The Jake and the Kid stories seem to provide an Arcadian retreat which obviates the necessity of coming to terms with such a world; however, The Kite suggests a movement toward an imaginative perspective which has the power to give life and coherence to a fallen world. In The Vanishing Point, imaginative perception revitalizes a barren world and effects a reconciliation between man and man and between man and his environment. It is this comprehensive and affirmative perspective which allows the artist to perceive a paradise in a fallen world.

PREFACE

I am indebted to Associate Professor John Moss. He has been generous with his time and discerning in directing my enthusiastic, but errant, appreciation of the fiction of W.O. Mitchell.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

W.O. Mitchell has produced many works for radio and television. The best known of these have been collected and published as the Jake and the Kid stories. In addition, Mitchell has published three novels, Who has seen the wind, The Kite, and The Vanishing Point. Nevertheless, it appears that he has received a minimum of critical attention. There have been the usual reviews; essays by Michael Hornyansky and Catherine McLay on The Kite; William New's comparative study of Who has seen the wind and The Kite and Patricia Barclay's article outlining the contours of Mitchell's career as a writer.¹ Warren Tallman, Desmond Pacey, Northrop Frye and Doug Jones have undertaken to place Mitchell within the context of Canadian writing in general.

¹ Michael Hornyansky, "Countries of the Mind," Tamarack Review, 26 (Winter 1963), 58-68; Catherine McLay, "The Kite: A Study in Immortality," Journal of Canadian Fiction, II, No. 2 (Spring 1973), 43-48; William New, "A Feeling of Completion; Aspects of W.O. Mitchell," Canadian Literature, 17 (Summer 1963), 22-23; Patricia Barclay, "Regionalism and the Writer: A Talk with W.O. Mitchell," Canadian Literature, 14 (Autumn 1962), 53-56.

Tallman's essay, "Wolf in the Snow",² establishes that there is a thematic link between Who has seen the wind and several other Canadian novels that also deal with the problems of alienation and isolation. In Creative Writing in Canada,³ Pacey groups Mitchell with Sinclair Ross and E.A. McCourt as one of the promising group of writers of the forties who joined the realistic tradition, established by Grove, Callaghan and MacLennan, challenging the historical romances and regional idylls which were in vogue well into the twentieth century. In the concluding chapter of The Literary History of Canada,⁴ Frye indicates that Mitchell is one of several artists who manifest a distinctly Canadian sensibility in their response to the vastness of the Canadian scene. It is Doug Jones, in his study, Butterfly on Rock,⁵ who amplifies Frye's subsequent discussion of the garrison society and relates this concept specifically to Who has seen the wind. Jones sees Mitchell's novel as one of many Canadian works in which the community is portrayed suppressing the vital elements associated with the land and he establishes that the struggle between the garrison culture and the land is the basic, rather than incidental, pattern of the novel. Many of these studies are useful ones

² Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," Canadian Literature, 5 (Summer 1960), pp. 7-20.

³ Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1964), pp. 223-225

⁴ Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klink, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 828.

⁵ Doug Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 37-38.

which illumine a particular work or serve to place Mitchell's fiction within the context of Canadian writing in general. Nevertheless, they scarcely constitute a comprehensive view of the fiction of W.O. Mitchell.

Now that Mitchell has published The Vanishing Point, which not only has met with general acclaim but also fulfils the promise of his earlier works, it seems timely to take a tentative step toward a comprehensive view of his fiction. One aspect of Mitchell's writing invites investigation in particular. It would seem that his fiction reveals an on-going search for a satisfactory mode of perceiving the human experience. Who has seen the wind, Jake and the Kid, The Kite and The Vanishing Point are all quite different fictional forms and this in itself suggests that Mitchell may be interested in the different perspective that each allows. Furthermore, his protagonists generally seem to be in search of a coherent vision. Therefore, this study is concerned with the matter of perception as it manifests itself in the narrative techniques and as a subject of Mitchell's fiction.

Although Mitchell has experimented with different forms, all of his works, with the obvious exception of the Jake and the Kid stories, are generally referred to as novels. This designation is suitable enough in the case of Who has seen the wind, The Kite and The Vanishing Point in that in each Mitchell clearly does portray a character within the context of his society which Frye indicates is the function most appropriate to the novelist.⁶ However, these works can also be classi-

⁶ Northrop Frye, "The Four Forms of Fiction," rpt. in Philip Stevick ed., The Theory of the Novel (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 33.

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fied more precisely and, perhaps, it is useful to do so in that each of the fictional forms implies a different narrative technique. In the case of Who has seen the wind, Brian O'Connell moves from his initial and innocent state of harmony and equanimity to a state of experience and disillusionment in a darkening world. This is the particular process which Maurice Shroder sees as peculiar to the Bildungsroman, perhaps the most basic form of the novel.⁷

The Kite is a hybrid fictional form. It is a novel in that Daddy Sherry is a fully portrayed character who is seen in the context of Shelby, his prairie town. However, Daddy may be the dominant figure in the novel, but he is not the protagonist. The Kite follows the protagonist, David Lang, through his process of education which does not end in disillusionment but rather with an unconvincing illumination and a quickening of David's powers that promises to rescue him from limbo.

This somewhat happy ending, coupled with the fact that most of the characters are stylized figures suggesting the projection of ideals and wishes, indicates that The Kite is at least as much romance as it is a novel. There are also aspects of The Kite which link it with the traditions of Menippean Satire as it is described by Frye in his essay on fictional forms.⁸ In conformity with the conventions of this form,

⁷ Maurice Z. Shroder, "The Novel as a Genre," rpt. in Philip Stevick, ed., The Theory of the Novel (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 16.

⁸ Frye, "The Four Forms of Fiction," pp. 37-41.

Shelby is portrayed in Utopian terms. The town of Shelby is an idyllic place, quite apart from the rest of the harried world. The inhabitants are, for the most part, gentle folk whose problems are only minor ones. Although most of the characters, with the exception of Daddy Sherry, tend to be stylized figures, they display some measure of erudite and encyclopaedic knowledge which, by virtue of its inadequacy, becomes the object of the satire itself. Thus the main thrust of the work is the ridiculing of the "philosophus gloriosus" as is customarily the case in such satire.

Eleven years after Mitchell published The Kite, he published The Vanishing Point, a novel written in the mythopoeic tradition as it is defined by both Northrop Frye and Harry Slochower. In The Bush Garden,⁹ Frye indicates that the primary element in the mythopoeic act is the identification of the subject and the object, or of the creator and the object of his creation. In his work, Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics,¹⁰ Slochower elaborates, defining a distinctive mythopoeic structure in which the protagonist, who nostalgically recalls a golden past from which he was expelled by his acts of rebelliousness, undergoes a long difficult struggle. Usually he emerges, having won a tentative victory, and experiences a sort of home-coming, although the

⁹ Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 242

¹⁰ Harry Slochower, Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), pp. 12-41.

home is not usually the one which he left in the first place. Traditionally this hero is acclaimed as a culture hero because he redeems what is valuable from the society against which he rebelled. The mythopoeic writer is concerned with translating the most basic and recurrent human dramas into his own contemporary terms and usually he portrays the complexity of his society in a unified manner.

The Vanishing Point has the hallmarks of a mythopoeic work.

The narrative technique suggests an identification between the creator and the protagonist, the object of his creation. The structure of Carlyle's quest is also mythopoeic for he recalls his golden past; he rebels against the sterility of white society; and he escapes to Paradise. There he is accepted as a leader and he gains a new perspective which allows him to see without distortion and to know that he is finally home. The use of the controlling metaphor of the diabolic carnival lends coherence to the novel and to the portrayal of the contemporary society. Also in conformity with the tradition, the novel resounds with echoes of other such quests through allusions to Jacob and Esau, Alice in Wonderland and Blake's "Songs of Experience".

Similarly the Jake and the Kid stories may also be classified precisely. These stories conform to the traditions of the classical idyll or eclogue. Their spontaneity and robustness recalls that of Theocritus and the little prairie town of Crocus is conceived as a Canadian Arcadia. In conformity with pastoral conventions, the Kid is the innocent who observes and comments upon his relatively idyllic world and he plays his role in the usual dirges, love-lays, eulogies, singing

matches and rustic dialogues. However, it must be noted that although the Kid and his fellows speak in a conventional rustic idiom, they do not give voice to the penetrating and subtle perceptions which characterize some of the classical eclogues.

In the context of this study of Mitchell's fiction, his use of a variety of forms is significant inasmuch as each allows a different mode of perceiving the world. The story of the growth and development of a very young child in Who has seen the wind lends itself to a narrator who speaks with a relatively distinctive and omniscient voice from some lofty vantage point. This perspective allows the narrator to record the workings of a child's mind; to colour the setting with the realism and imagination of his adult mind; and to establish the fact that the protagonist is moving along an established literary trail. By way of contrast, since the Jake and the Kid stories are idylls, they are narrated by the Kid himself. As an innocent, he perceives the essential unity of his relatively idyllic world. He also senses, rather than perceives, the boundaries beyond which he may not go, but it is the reader who comes to see the limitations of the innocent's perceptions, as the Kid functions in a role usually assumed by more sophisticated rustics.

The Kite, being a hybrid fictional form, is narrated in a complex manner. The intellectualizing voice of a would-be philosopher narrates and explicates all events; a romancer seems to be responsible for the stylized figures and for the wishfulfilment contours of the action; and it appears that it is a novelist who creates the irrepressible and vital Daddy Sherry. However, the voice of the philosopher and the influence

of the romancer pale before the vitality of Daddy Sherry and it seems that The Kite may be the experimental ground on which Mitchell discovers the limitations of the philosopher's and romancer's perception and the validity of the novelist's, who sees the potential in the bits and pieces of human experience to become part of a new and vital creation.

In his mythopoetic novel, The Vanishing Point, Mitchell uses a narrator who is neither lofty nor given to explication. Rather, he stands in an intimate position in relation to the protagonist and his voice often gives way to that of Carlyle Sinclair's. This narrator scans the diversity of the contemporary Canadian scene, as well as the complexity of the protagonist's mind, with a relentless sort of realism that spares no detail. At the same time, the novel is a tightly controlled one for it is imaginatively informed by the metaphor of the diabolic carnival and it follows the customary pattern of a mythopoetic quest. It seems then that Mitchell reverts to the use of a narrator who recalls the imaginative and realistic narrator of Who has seen the wind who also saw the protagonist moving along an established literary trail. Possibly Mitchell's intervening experiments, with the perspectives of innocents, philosophers and romancers may be an indication of his own ambivalence about the means by which to come to terms with a fallen world. Perhaps it was necessary to explore the alternate possibilities before he could return to some of the narrative techniques of the first novel and could create a new character who completes the journey which Brian begins.

In each of Mitchell's works, the matter of perception also seems

to concern the protagonists. In Who has seen the wind Brian O'Connell is, initially, enchanted by his ability as an innocent to perceive a special splendor in the commonplace moments of his prairie life. However, he loses this special perception and subsequently struggles to make sense of his postlapsarian world. First of all, he explores the perspective of a philosopher and, as the novel concludes, he seems to be taking the first tentative step toward perceiving his world through the eyes of a "poet". None the less, in his eyes and in the eyes of the narrator, the world still appears to be restraining, divided, demonic and absurd.

The Jake and the Kid stories are highly sentimentalized pastoral idylls and therefore there is little suggestion that the protagonist or anyone else has a problem that cannot quickly and easily be resolved. However, as the Kid romps through his bucolic world, he at least senses that he is limited and confined by his state. The reader is made very much aware of the inadequacies of his innocent perception for the Kid sees only what is immediate and superficial and finds it difficult to classify and analyze his experiences.

In The Kite, David Lang's general problem seems to be that he has the facility but not the vision of an artist and his specific problem seems to be that his creative powers, which should assist him with his Daddy Sherry assignment, are blocked because he cannot see the secret that Daddy Sherry has for him. Nevertheless, he finally does perceive Daddy's secret and hears, consequently, the promise that his creative powers will be quickened.

In The Vanishing Point, Carlyle Sinclair is also troubled by the matter of perception for he is sent to Paradise to instruct the people there who, for the most part, see more clearly than he does. His search for the lost Victoria takes him through the hell of Carnival City and his own past. However, when his journey is over, he has won a new kind of perception which comprehends that of the innocent, the romancer and the philosopher and has the power to give life where there was none before. In the process of acquiring this perception, Carlyle also learns to see the limited possibilities of dealing with a world which is very much like Brian O'Connell's. He learns to break the patterns which restrain, to effect a reconciliation between those who are divided, to embrace the demonic and to celebrate the absurd. It seems that it is Carlyle Sinclair who discovers the means by which Brian O'Connell might resolve his problem of perception.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Mitchell should have produced a mythopoeic work such as The Vanishing Point inasmuch as the preceding works, taken as a whole, have some of the contours of a mythopoeic quest. In Who has seen the wind, the narrator and ultimately the protagonist seem alienated from their environment. The narrator of this novel is often aloof and detached from the characters and their world, which he describes in the most neutral of voices or by allowing his characters to speak for themselves. When he views the prairie world and prairie people imaginatively, it seems that he acts upon the scene to give it a particular aspect rather than responding to it. Possibly the narrator's distance from the world he sees, coupled with his active efforts

to reshape it, suggests a certain malaise. Brian too becomes a stranger in his prairie world which puzzles him with its restraints, divisions, absurdities and demonic aspect, and he moves toward the detachment of the philosopher and the imagination of the poet in his attempts to comprehend it. The sensibility which rebels against the status quo is the sensibility of the mythopoeic hero who finds himself in a setting which he refuses to accept. However, such a hero usually has a memory of a better time or a golden past. So it is in Mitchell's fiction for, in the Jake and the Kid stories, the narrator and the protagonist become one in the person of the unnamed prelapsarian Kid who lives in relatively idyllic harmony in the Arcadian town of Crocus. However, Arcadia is eventually left behind when the narrator of The Kite and the protagonist, David Lang, sally forth in an attempt to discover the vision that will quicken their powers. Both emerge from their struggles with a tentative or limited kind of victory, ready to play out the next phase of the mythopoeic quest in which the hero redeems what is valuable and experiences a sort of home-coming.

In The Vanishing Point, Mitchell returns to use what is valuable in the narrative techniques of Who has seen the wind. He effects a sense of realism and he engages a much developed imagination that does not so much impose a particular aspect on a given scene but, rather, responds to the totality of the protagonist's world and gives it a distinctive shape and unmistakable coherence. Carlyle Sinclair also completes the last stages of the mythopoeic quest by rescuing the valuable technical knowledge of the white society and taking it with him to

the Indian Reservation, Paradise. It is in Paradise that he experiences a kind of home-coming for, although he does not regain the lost state of innocence, which he and Brian O'Connell once knew, he does become attuned to the natural rhythms which he was taught to deny. It is then that his apparently sterile and demonic world is revitalized and he knows that he has found the only paradise there is. Thus it appears that The Vanishing Point completes the quest which begins in Who has seen the wind.

CHAPTER II
THE WAY OUT OF EDEN

When Who has seen the wind was published in 1947, it was generally regarded as an exciting and promising first novel.¹ It is now clear that this novel indeed anticipates much of what follows in Mitchell's fiction in terms of narrative techniques and protagonist's problems. The narrator of this novel speaks from a remote vantage point, describes the characters and their world realistically and imaginatively and displays a penchant for established literary trails. These are the qualities which characterize some of Mitchell's subsequent narrators. In addition, the protagonist, Brian O'Connell, views his world first as an innocent and then intellectually and emotionally. It is these modes of perception which subsequent narrators and protagonists examine and explore.

¹ Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1964), p. 225.

The narrator of Who has seen the wind seems remote in several senses. He speaks from a vantage point which allows him a broad perspective of space and time for he scans the vastness of a prairie panorama and is also able to see that Brian's town, with its sleepy main street and false fronted stores, has grown from one homesteader's sod hut. However, this narrator can also narrow his focus and probe behind the false fronts to view the dramas played out in school and manse and shoemaker's shop. When he does so, he often maintains an aloofness and allows the faithfully recorded voices of his characters to tell the story. When the text requires his voice, it can be a completely neutral and detached one as it is in the following typical excerpt:

On the porch below, Brian stared at the painting setter. Open the mouth; spill the tongue; close, open, close.

Such detachment may well contribute to the realistic quality of the novel, although this must also be attributed to accuracy of observation. When the narrator directs his attention to children, he notes their patterns with particular subtlety. He reproduces their childish incantations and the complex counterpoint of their speech. He provides sensitive descriptions of their reactions to impressive and oppressive adults, Christmas morning crises and their moments of dawning awareness:

²W.O. Mitchell, Who has seen the wind (Toronto: MacMillan, 1972), p. 183. Further references in this chapter are identified by page numbers in parentheses.

This same narrator can also speak with a distinctive voice that intrudes itself upon the reader and imaginatively colours that which is perceived. In a typical passage, he describes a prairie scene in language that demands that the reader experience the sinister silence and sterility of the prairie:

Where spindling poplars lift their dusty
leaves and wild sunflowers stare, the
gravestones stand among the prairie grasses.
Over them a rapt and endless silence lies.

(295)

In a similarly descriptive passage, he portrays the workings of Brian O'Connell's mind as "an alchemy imperceptible as the morning wind, a growing elation of such fleeting delicacy and poignancy that he dared not turn his mind to it for fear that he might spoil it, that it might be carried away as lightly as one strand of spider web on a sigh of wind" (104-105). Similarly, imaginative language colours many of the lesser moments of the novel. Cuckoo clocks "poke the stillness" (20), the house cracks "its knuckles" (20) and butterflies go "winking and blinking" (263) across the prairie in Who has seen the wind.

Mitchell's realism lends an authenticity to Who has seen the wind and his imagination gives this Bildungsroman a particular intensity. Another dimension is added to the novel in that much of Brian's experience appears to be patterned after Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality". The relationship between the two works is explicitly established by Digby who finally recognizes that Brian is a child of the Ode:

Digby was struck by something more than familiar in the serious eyes under the broad band of the toque with its red pom. His mind went swiftly back to the first day of school some six years ago when Brian had faced him in the office. He thought of Young Ben, who no longer attended his school. That was it - the look upon Brian's face - the same expression that had puzzled him on the Young Ben's: maturity in spite of the formlessness of childish features, wisdom without years. "Intimations of Immortality," he thought.

(292)

Not only is there this explicit identification of the two works but also there is an implicit relationship. Similar assumptions about the pre-existence of the soul, the nature of childhood innocence, the man-nature relationship and the relationship of the real and the ideal appear to inform both works. Furthermore, the contours of Brian's journey are much like those of Wordsworth's. He too begins with a child's untroubled play and moves through the stages when there seems to be "splendour in the grass"; when he is preoccupied by "obstinate questioning" and when he senses the "shades of the prison house". Finally, like Wordsworth, he arrives at a period of self examination and recall. It must be acknowledged, however, that Mitchell does not follow this trail slavishly; indeed his terrain is dominated by a wind that does not even whisper in the Ode and it sometimes is illumined by a demonic kind of light quite foreign to Wordsworth. Furthermore, Brian's path seems to go beyond Wordsworth's merging with what might be Childe Roland's "darkening path" across the "grey plain".

In his preface to the Ode, Wordsworth identifies the Platonic

concept of a prior state of existence as one of the basic assumptions of the poem. Although Mitchell does not preface his novel with any such declarations, he does hint at some previous state in which both Brian and Young Ben apparently existed. Gerald O'Connell ponders the mute relationship between the two boys and wonders what they possibly could have in common. By way of reply comes the narrator's comment:

And Brian O'Connell across the aisle was aware of a strange attraction to the Young Ben. At no time had he played with him in the town; he had seen him seldom, having caught a glimpse of him only now and again, hauling bundles of washing to and from town families; yet it seemed to him that at some time he had known him intimately.

(85-86)

Later, Brian himself makes a similar observation: "He realized with a start that an excitement, akin to the feeling that had moved him so often, was beginning to tremble within him. His knees felt weak with it; the Young Ben could cause it too. The Young Ben was part of it. He's something I know, thought Brian" (123). Presumably their mutual attraction, the sense of prior knowledge and the feeling argue for the fact that they both have come "trailing clouds of glory" from some antecedent home. In the novel, as in the Ode, this assumption is not merely an exotic touch but rather essential to the concept of the nature of childhood innocence.

In the Ode, the prior blessedness accounts for the fact that children are the "best philosophers", the "Eye among the blind" who display an enviable degree of equanimity as they sport on the shore of

eternity, listening without fear to the roar of the mighty waters. Similarly, it accounts for their remarkable capacity to perceive the celestial light in the commonplace aspects of nature. In Mitchell's terms, the child's prior state of existence also allows him to participate with composure in the awesome mysteries of life and death. Therefore, Brian is privileged to look up into the "sun's unbearable radiance" (10) one moment and in the next to become an indifferent agent of death for a passing caterpillar and a spider. Similarly, he contemplates his brother's impending death with detachment and announces to Forbsie, in a matter of fact way, that the baby is going to heaven. Furthermore, Brian is even able to play at being an ant in a deep dark cave, presumably because, in his present state, he is not troubled by the possibility that his play anticipates what will become a reality for him when he feels the prison house walls closing in on him.

Brian also demonstrates a capacity to perceive and experience a special splendour in commonplace things. A dew drop on a spirea leaf occasions a strange sense of enchantment:

Within him something was opening, releasing shyly as the petals of a flower open, with such gradualness that he was hardly aware of it. But it was happening: an alchemy imperceptible as the morning wind, a growing elation of such fleeting delicacy and poignancy that he dared not turn his mind to it for fear that he might spoil it, that it might be carried away as lightly as one strand of spider web on a sigh of wind.

Subsequently the feeling comes again and again, triggered by many apparently unrelated things: the wind in the poplars; the wind humming in telephone wires; ruffled rooster feathers; the smell of a burning straw stack; the sound of a buck saw; a crow calling; a tiny garden toad; and the smell of leaf mold, clover and wolf willow. The simple things which seem to be bathed in the celestial light of the Ode and which give rise to the feeling in the novel are, primarily, the things of nature. Another assumption that is basic to both of the works is that the splendour that the innocent child perceives in nature is the shadow of the absolute forms of eternity. In the Ode, the philosopher-child can read the eternal mind in the forms of nature. In the novel, the wind, which is symbolic of Godhood according to Mitchell's epigraph, attends almost every occasion of the feeling. In fact Brian notes that "the feeling was most exquisite when the wind blew" (120). However, both Wordsworth and Mitchell appear to agree that time and experience lead the child away from his privileged perception. In the Ode, the splendour eventually fades into the light of common day and in the novel Brian finally says, "I don't get the feeling any more. I don't think I will get it anymore" (292).

The trail that leads Brian to the place where he laments the passing of "the feeling" is also very like Wordsworth's. As the composure and the sense of splendour begin to fade, a new mode of perception begins to develop. In his preface to the Ode, Wordsworth explains that this new perception is one which confirms the

validity of the internal world of consciousness, as opposed to the external world, and of the ideal as opposed to the real. In the language of the Ode itself, Wordsworth talks of "obstinate questionings", "vanishings" and of moving about in "worlds not realized". In the novel, a movement toward the ideal or abstract can be detected in Brian's attempts to grasp the being or principle which might inform his world. At first he conceives of R.W., a hybrid god made up of the concrete details supplied by Uncle Sean and his tales of little men in "two inch overhaws" (16) and by the god of the stained glass window: "The man standing in the center of the light colors, decided Brian, was about as high as a person's knee, his own knee. He wore a hat like Uncle Sean's, uncreased just as it had come from the store shelf - a blue gumdrop hat. He wore white rubber boots, and He held a very small, very white lamb in His arms" (32-33). Later he conceives and contemplates a much less human god. "God could be like a flame, Brian was thinking, not a real flame, but like a flame. Perhaps He was a great person made entirely of flame - with a flame beard and flame lips licking out to change the shape of His mouth" (59). Subsequently, Brian no longer tries to picture god; rather he thinks of him more abstractly, as a personality. He turns to his grandmother and says, "'God isn't very considerate - is he, Gramma?'" (167). Finally Brian's questioning leads him past the stage of thinking in anthropomorphic terms. He no longer thinks in images; he gropes for the principles that might give coherence to his experience. "'I've been trying to figure out

for a long time, and it won't! Everything has to figure out, doesn't it?" (289). Apparently Brian is moving toward the abstract world of the philosopher.

Brian's experience of the feeling leads him to the discovery that his inner world of emotional responses has a vitality of its own that lends colour and significance to his experience of the external world. The day that his puppy is returned to him is, naturally, an important one, but his inner responses make it an occasion when the whole world is vibrantly alive: "The boy was aware that the yard was not still. Every grass-blade and leaf and flower seemed to be breathing, or perhaps, whispering - something to him - something for him. The puppy's ear was inside out. Within himself, Brian felt a soft explosion of feeling. It was one of completion and of culmination" (59). On a less happy day, when his father is seriously ill, Brian's emotions translate the simple touch of his mother's hand into a momentous occurrence: "He felt the deliberate and reassuring pressure of her hand, and with such suddenness that his heart almost stopped its beating, that his knees were weak under him, and his throat was aching with unbelievable hurt - the feeling was in him", (206): Even when a meadow lark sings, Brian's emotions mark the moment:

A meadow lark splintered the stillness.
The startling notes stayed on in the
boy's mind.

It sang again.

A sudden breathlessness possessed him;
fierce excitement rose in him.

Eventually "the feeling" fails to come any more, but it has taught Brian a certain inwardness, so that he readily accepts Digby's suggestion that the external world exists only inasmuch as he perceives it. They consider the attributes of the post office and Digby explains:

"That's just a set of sensations - nothing else. They're yours. They're inside you."

Brian tried to work his way through the seething sees and feels. "I guess you were right," he said.

(288)

It would seem that Brian would also have understood what Wordsworth was talking about in his preface to the Ode in which he says: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence..."³

Apparently, one of the difficulties of both Wordsworth's and Brian's journey derives from the conflict created by viewing the same world both intellectually and emotionally. Wordsworth celebrates his philosophical questionings and yet the Ode is primarily a paenegyric in praise of the child's emotional capacity to give splendour to the world through the innocence of his perception. In the novel, the scene concerning the two-headed calf seems to crystallize Brian's version of the same dilemma. Long after, Brian

³ William Wordsworth quotation is from his preface to "Intimations of Immortality", as the preface is reproduced in English Romantic Writers, ed., David Perkins, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 279.

recalls the sight of the dead calf:

It lay on the straw-littered floor. Its necks were like a slingshot - a willow slingshot with two arms y-ing out. The feeling was fierce in Brian as he stared down; it possessed an uncertain and breathless quality; he felt as though he were on a tight-rope high in the air. Silently he looked down at the two moist, black noses, the two sets of cupping ears, the twin foreheads with their identical diamonds of white, the hair in the center of each curling in twin whorls as though they had been combed by the same hand.

-(173)

Perhaps the scene haunts him because he sees himself in the calf with two heads, or two directing forces, for he too is directed by two impulses. His intellect sends him on the upward trail of the Platonic philosopher in search of high ideals and absolutes: his emotions, which are triggered by the concrete world that the philosopher would transcend, send him on a path that would seem to turn inward. Little wonder that he senses that he is on a tightrope. Inasmuch as he is on his way to becoming a philosopher, he moves on a plane well above those shackled to the illusions of the Platonic cave; yet, while "the feeling" still comes to him, he is in danger of losing his philosophical footing and capitulating to the powerful attraction of emotion.

As it happens, "the feeling" fades and Brian, the potential philosopher, persists to the end of the novel still convinced that everything has to "figure out". However, if he could read the minds

of Milt and Hislop and his grandmother, he might be less confident. Milt testifies to the pain of the intellectual process as he talks with Digby:

"That there tree is doing all right,
an' it's doin' it without thinkin',
Me - I think - I'm havin' one hell of
a time."

"Are you?"

"Yep, I'm givin' it up."

"Thinking?"

"Thinkin'."

(133-134)

Presumably it is because Milt discovers that he can not give up "thinkin'" that he comes to rely more and more heavily upon the anaesthetic effects of The Ben's brew. Hislop, who is driven from the town because he insists upon trying to actualize the ideal in the real, might well provide a lesson for Brian. So might his grandmother, who in the wisdom of her years, concludes that there is no particular significance or coherence to the fragments of her experiences: "Beyond the emotional coloring that each had, they possessed no particular significance. Meaning was a tag that people tied to things, nothing more" (97). It is Digby who turns Brian's attention inward to examine the testimony of his feelings and the potential philosopher is relieved to have found a new direction in which to turn.

"I get the closest - I used to -
when there's a feeling. Is there a
feeling?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'm on the right track?"

"I think you are."

"A person can do it by feeling?"

"That's the way," said Digby.

"Then, I'm on the right track."

Brian said it with conviction.

(289)

Just a few days later Brian seems to achieve the requisite "distance" that allows him to begin the examination of his feelings: "As he turned toward the door, he was suddenly aware of an emotion long familiar to him; it was as though he were recognizing again an experience that his memory had stored for him, but not too well" (293). It would seem then, that as the novel ends, Brian begins to perceive his world in the manner of a poet, or at least in the manner of Wordsworth, who also recollected his emotions in tranquility.

In the process of maturing, Brian experiences three modes of perception that are more or less parallel to those documented in the Ode. As an innocent, he looks upon life and death with equanimity and is able to see the splendour in nature. As the splendour begins to fade, he becomes a potential philosopher, for he attempts to move upward toward abstract ideas. He also becomes a poet for he begins to look inward and discovers the power of his feelings, or emotions, to shape the world that he perceives. In his subsequent works, Mitchell continues to explore the potentials of each of these perspectives. In Jake and the Kid, the prairie town of Crocus is seen through the eyes of an innocent. In The Kite, his narrator views things with the eyes of the philosopher and a romancer, while his most credible character steadfastly insists upon retaining the perspective of an innocent. In The Vanishing Point, the innocent, the philosopher and the poet ultimately become one in the person of Carlyle Sinclair, and the chaotic diversity of the fallen world is finally given coherence through the author's

shaping and synthesizing perception.

Not only does Brian's journey correspond to Wordsworth's but also there are aspects of his world which recall Wordsworth's. The Ode notes that "shades of the prison house" inevitably close in on the growing boy but Mitchell expands the point. On Brian's first day of school, he finds that he is bound physically for he must stand and sit at Miss MacDonald's command. In time he will discover what Digby already knows; namely, that the highroad to learning may be an intellectual blind alley for it is presided over by the myopic Miss MacDonald. The episode that deals with Brian's first day at school is concluded with a passage that suggests the hopelessness and paralysis of the schoolhouse inmates. "For some time after Brian had left, Digby sat at his desk: On the half-opened window behind him a fly, lulled to languor by the morning sun, bunted crazily up the pane, fell protestingly, and lay half-paralyzed on the sill, the numbness of his sound lost in the emptiness of the office" (73). The school prison house proves to be an antechamber to the larger prison house, which is the prairie society in which Brian finds himself. This society happens to be the kind of prison that Frye and Jones see as a garrison which militates against its inmates as vigorously as it militates against the enemy without. Mrs. Abercrombie, one of the most forceful members of the power-elite of the garrison, is relentless in her attempts to punish the town prostitute and she is equally hostile to the prison's foreign inmates. Therefore, Tang and Voie are ostracised and

Old Wong is driven to suicide. Hislop is expelled from the garrison for he threatens the order of things by his acts of reconciliation and by his renegade love of beauty. Digby too feels the scourge of the prison keepers, and almost becomes one of Mrs. Abercrombie's victims, because he does not subscribe to her sense of propriety and cannot agree that the wild and irrepressible children of nature are necessarily the enemy.

The garrison-prison by no means expends all of its energy in keeping its inmates in order. It has plenty of wrath left for Sean, Saint Sammy, The Ben and Young Ben, all of whom are the enemy because they are aligned with nature. The attacks on Sean are somewhat subtle ones. When he approaches the garrison stronghold, little children are rushed from his presence. The devastating weapon of indifference is turned against him when he pleads in vain with garrison farmers to practise irrigation and Mr. Abercrombie deliberately places financial obstacles in his way when he attempts to establish his own irrigation system. The attacks on Saint Sammy are even less subtle. Bent Candy's devious manoeuvres are calculated to deprive Saint Sammy of his raison d'être, the gloriously unbroken Clydes. Apparently there were also earlier attacks on Jehovah's Hired Man, for he carries the garrison scars which he displays when he bursts into his distorted version of the gospel hymn "Count Your Blessings". "Count your labels, count them one by one" (261). Although many of the power-elite depend upon The Ben for his brew, he is still classified as enemy for, in his amorality, he disdains

the code of the garrison. Such lawlessness is not countenanced and The Ben ends up languishing in the relative comfort of the garrison jail cell. Not content with this victory, the garrison forces set out to capture the Young Ben in order to send him away for "correction". As it turns out, the dissenters in the garrison ranks manage to sabotage this particular undertaking. However, the prairie people are also active in their own defence. The Ben has a glorious kind of revenge the Sunday his still detonates in the church basement between the announcement of the Ladies' Auxiliary Chicken Dinner and the passing of the collection plate. Saint Sammy calls the wrath of nature upon the town in the form of a storm which spares Sean's farm and revitalizes Grandmother MacMurray, but destroys Bent Candy's barn and does fifty thousand dollars damage to the town. It appears that Brian awakes in a postlapsarian prison in which there may still be some hope for the so-called "enemy" clamours at the gates of the prison and at least threatens to destroy the fortifications.

Wordsworth's Ode does not belabour the point that the human family is divided against itself but Mitchell's novel does, perhaps because the dichotomy lends itself to scenes that are amusing, satiric and even dramatic. However, this division appears to be an integral part of Mitchell's own vision which deviates from Wordsworth's. In the Ode, the fallen world is merely bathed in "the light of common day", but, in the novel, Brian finds himself in a world which seems actively demonic. Therefore, it is not surpris-

ing that, in Mitchell's world, the human family is divided into two camps, each of which wages war on the other instead of moving toward a reconciliation that could only be fruitful since each is in possession of what the other lacks. The prairie people have irrepressible vitality: Sean's irrigated vegetable garden is one of the few that makes it through the drought to harvest; Saint Sammy's prophetic ravings have an authority before which Bent Candy and Reverend Mr. Powelly pale; The Ben's barroom stories stop itinerant travellers in their tracks; and Brian sees the everlasting prairie itself in Young Ben. The garrison's virtues are more obscure: Ruth and Svarich demonstrate a sense of social responsibility toward the Wongs; Digby's sensibilities allow him to recognize and respond to the needs of a variety of people; and presumably the skills of the pharmacist and the doctor are valuable, even if they are not always efficacious; and supposedly the gentle order and decorum that Maggie creates in her household is to be preferred to the squalor of The Ben's shack or Saint Sammy's piano box. If there is any hope that the divided family might ever be reconciled, the promise lies in the mute relationship that exists between Brian and Young Ben; nevertheless, even this seems doomed, for as Brian moves more and more toward abstract thought, he moves further and further away from Young Ben whose responses are intuitive rather than intellectual.

Since the world in which Brian finally finds himself is more actively demonic than Wordsworth's, it is to be expected that his journey toward it should be more rugged. The point has already

been made that Brian's experience of "the feeling" corresponds to Wordsworth's moments when he sees the world "apparelled in celestial light". However, if one considers some of the events which occasion "the feeling" and the characteristics of the emotion evoked, then one discovers a pathway that is a good deal more difficult than Wordsworth's. Initially, "the feeling" has the Ode's sense of splendour. When Brian sees the dew drop on a spirea leaf, he knows "the feeling's" delicate alchemy which elates him and makes the world seem vibrantly alive. However, subsequently "the feeling" assumes a new character and comes under different circumstances. When Bobbie and Brian find the carcass of the tailless gopher, it comes fiercely, "uncontrollably so, with wild and unbidden power, with a new, frightening quality" (625). On another occasion when there is "the smell of fall wild on the wind that lifted carelessly now and again, with the clear air crisp and at the same time mellow, he was suddenly sad, his throat aching, his heart filled with unbearably sweet and maddening melancholy" (172). The day that Brian sees the two-headed calf, "the feeling" is fierce and strange and when his father is sick, he is filled with unbelievable hurt. As Brian realizes the finality of his father's death, "the feeling" is sudden, fierce, and seems to possess him. Thus the events which occasion "the feeling" are no longer delicate moments involving dew drops and spirea leaves, but rather moments of violence, death, wildness, absurdity and loneliness. The sense of splendour gives way to a sense of wild power, melancholy, uncertainty, pain and fierce ex-

citement. Apparently Brian's travels take him through difficult country.

It would seem that the song of the meadow lark, which is heard throughout the novel, serves to indicate the difficult nature of Brian's world. The lark always sings with an untainted sweetness and purity, creating an ironic counterpoint to many events. As Ruth Thompson ruminates about her helplessness to protect Tang and Vooie from the bigotry of the town folk, the lark sings. It sings again as Brian buries Jappy and at the moment that he hears of his father's death. The meadow lark is heard as the garrison forces proceed with the mockery of justice that is The Ben's trial. Thus the meadow lark is not only a reminder of a lost purity or innocence but also serves to emphasize the bigotry, pain and injustice of Brian's world.

Similarly, the light imagery in the novel illumines the demonic quality of Brian's fallen world. Initially there seems to be a balance between the light which is demonic and the light which is benign. Brian sees demonic light stabbing from Mrs. Abercrombie's glasses, or in the farm house windows that burn yellow in the night or in the glinting winter sunshine, but he also sees benign light on a dragonfly's shimmering wings, or in sparkling raindrops, or on bare branches of a poplar, transfigured with light. However, by the conclusion of the novel, the demonic light seems to dominate the scene and Brian sees the moon, normally a source of benign light which shimmers and transfigures, as a pale ghost in danger of being

dissolved. The light which remains to illumine the prairie is demonic sunlight which glints from frost blackened leaves, or the eerie tinting green of Northern Lights. It seems then that as the day of the novel comes to an end, it is the benign light which has withdrawn from the sky and the demonic light which remains. Such a conclusion is a good deal more sinister than the one found in the Ode. There, the celestial radiance merely becomes the light of common day. None the less, the novel suggests that there is some kind of hope for there are parables of regeneration to be read in the final patterns of light and darkness: "As clouds' slow shadows melt across the prairie's face, more nights slip darkness over. Light then dark, then light again. Day then night, then day again. A meadow lark sings and it is spring. And summer comes" (295).

Not only do meadowlark and light suggest the demonic quality of Brian's world; so does the wind, the major motif of the novel. The book begins with a reference to the wind, which establishes it as being both benignly life-giving and demonically destructive. One reads that the prairie "lay wide around the town, stretching tan to the far line of the sky, shimmering under the June sun and waiting for the unfailing visitation of wind, gentle at first, barely stroking the long grasses and giving them life; later, a long hot gusting that would lift the black topsoil and pile it in barrow pits along the roads, or in deep banks against the fences" (3). Similarly, as Brian goes to church to see God, he feels the gentle wind ruffling his hair, but in the next instant the demonic wind also

makes its appearance: "A fervent whirlwind passed the brown house with the woman standing on the porch; at the trees before the church, it rose suddenly, setting every leaf in violent motion, as though an invisible hand had gripped the trunks and shaken them" (8). This same duality may also be observed on the occasion that Brian experiences the feeling for the first time. Indeed, this time demonic elements seem to prevail: "The poplars along the road shook light from their leaves. A tin can rolled in the street; a newspaper plastered itself against the base of a telephone pole; loose dust lifted. Dancing down the road appeared a dust-devil" (59).

The tendency for the demonic wind to dominate continues throughout the novel. By the conclusion, the gentle wind has all but disappeared, except for moments when the wind is heard "whispering through the long, dead grasses, through long and endless silence" (241), or when the gentle fall wind stirs "a tissue of sound through the dry leaves of the poplar outside" (238). Although these winds are recognizable descendants of the earlier benign winds, they have undergone a significant change. Now they are associated with dryness, death and endless silence. It appears they have taken at least one step toward the demonic. Meanwhile, the demonic winds continue to whirl and keen through the novel. One reads that in town, "the wind rose in the leaves of the poplar. It lifted the dust in the street along the front of the house; it whirled toward the center of the town in feverish little dust-devils" (185). Out on the prairie, Brian tries to hold together something within him-

self that the wind demands and relentlessly leaches from him. "Later he hears. "the sound of the wind, singing fierce and lost and lonely, rising and rising again, shearing high and higher still, singing vibrance in a void, forever and forever wild" (264). Apparently it is this wild and sinister wind that ultimately dominates Brian's prairie, for the last paragraph of the novel creates an image of a sterile whirlwind, turning in upon itself: "The wind turns in silent frenzy upon itself, whirling into a smoking funnel, breathing up topsoil and tumbleweed skeletons to carry them on its spinning way over the prairie, out and out to the far line of the sky" (296).

Since Mitchell prefaces his novel with the observation that many people believe the wind to be symbolic of Godhood, the wind imagery not only implies a demonic world but also a demonic god which informs it. Thus Brian, who instinctively gravitates toward order and beauty and vitality, ends his journey as a stranger in a thoroughly alien land which is illumined by sinister light and presided over by a demon whirlwind. It would appear that Brian has strayed far from Wordsworth's path in the Ode, where the most sinister light is the light of common day and the winds are merely incidental breezes that come "from fields of sleep".

A sense of disharmony between the individual and his surroundings seems to be basic to the absurdists' vision of the human dilemma; therefore, it is not surprising that Brian, the alien in a demonic land, senses the absurdity of both man and nature. Even as

he gropes for Platonic ideals of perfection, he stumbles across the discovery that people are inexplicably and irrationally attracted to what is imperfect. He ruminates: "The world was a funny place. He loved his runt pig that wasn't any good for anything. Ab was fussy about Noreen, the snuffiest cow in the herd, with her wheezing and sneezing and coughing. Before Annie's eyes had been straightened he had. . ." (224). Later he is troubled to find himself inexplicably attracted by Saint Sammy's ravings which he knows to be a powerful but incongruous conflation of barnyard and Bible:

"Be you not downcast, for I have prepared a place for you. Take with you Miriam an' Immaculate Holstein an' also them Clydes. Go you to Magnus Peterson, who is even now pumping full his stock trough. He will give onzuh you his south eighty fer pasture, an' there you will live to the end of your days when I shall take you up in the twinkling of an eye."

(258-259)

Indeed, such ravings even have the power to summon "the feeling" in Brian, but, in his insistence upon an ordered, rational world, he rejects the experience. "Listening to Saint Sammy, he had been carried away by the fervor of his words; he had felt for a while that he was closer, but it couldn't be right. Saint Sammy was crazy, crazy as a cut calf, Uncle Sean had said. A thing couldn't come closer through a crazy man gone crazy from the prairie" (194).

Absurdity is not found exclusively among the prairie people. Perhaps one of the most discordant moments of the novel occurs in town as Brian first experiences "the feeling":

He was filled with breathlessness and expectancy, as though he were going to be given something, as though he were about to find something.

"Breakfast, Spalpeen".

(105)

Brian is not witness to some of the other episodes in town in which people are essentially absurd; but they do not escape the eye of the narrator who portrays Judge Mortimer as a ridiculous mockery of the ideal of justice, who paws through a spring mail-order catalogue instead of The Criminal Code, while he presides at The Ben's trial. Mrs. Abercrombie and Reverend Mr. Powelly are also absurd as they get down on their knees to pray, with "their elbows on the rich velvet of Renaissance chairs" (265), that they will be spared the wrath of Saint Sammy's storm.

Nature too appears to be absurd for, with just a little help from the Hoffmans, it allows Fat's pair of rabbits to multiply out of all proportion until they are "in Hoffman's yard in such numbers that one's mind ceased to think of them in terms of rabbits, slipped a notch and thought of them in terms of rabbit" (164). With flagrant disregard for the norm, nature also produces the pathetically absurd two-headed calf which troubles Brian. Nature's absurdity persists to the last page of the novel, where it is manifested in the form of a jack rabbit with ears ridiculously erect that goes "bounding idiotically out over the prairie" (295).

When Brian's long journey is over, he finds himself in a world that is much more sinister than that of the Ode for it is

repressive, divided, demonic and absurd. None the less, the novel ends with a timid promise that "spring" will come again. Perhaps there is also hope in the fact that Digby redirects Brian back to Wordsworth's trail with the suggestion that he begin recollecting and examining his emotions. Possibly Brian, in the manner of Carlyle Sinclair, will eventually move from such introspection to a more creative and imaginative state. Perhaps then he may regain something of his lost innocence so that his sterile world will once again seem vibrantly alive and so that he can look upon its benign and demonic aspects with equanimity.

It would seem that there is a promise, rather than a problem, implicit in the narrative techniques of Who has seen the wind, for Mitchell indicates his ability to observe the panorama of his world with a realistic and imaginative eye as he directs Brian O'Connell along the way marked out by "Intimations of Immortality". However, the matter of perception remains a primary concern of the novel for, by the conclusion, Brian has not found a way to make sense of a bewildering and sterile world which confronts him and tantalizes with its promises of spring and its intimations of an order that Brian has yet to perceive. To some extent, Brian O'Connell's modes of perception anticipate the narrative techniques which Mitchell subsequently examines. In his prairie idylls, Mitchell explores the innocent perception of the Kid. In The Kite, he weighs the merits of the emotional and intellectual perspective of the romancer and the philosopher respectively. It is many years before Mitchell,

as a mythopoeic novelist, creates a unified picture of a complex
and fallen world and a character who manages to come to terms with
it.

CHAPTER III

AN ARCADIAN INTERLUDE

As early as 1942, Mitchell began writing eclogues, some of which were published in 1961 as the Jake and the Kid stories. It is possible that the eclogue, or pastoral idyll, had a special appeal for Mitchell in that its conventions are well defined ones, which could provide as specific a framework as "Intimations of Immortality", and in that a sentimentally conceived Arcadia, viewed through the eyes of an innocent, precludes the problems of a postlapsarian world. Speculation notwithstanding, the fact remains that Mitchell clearly dedicated a significant amount of his time to these stories. Therefore, this chapter briefly deals with the Arcadian qualities of Crocus, Saskatchewan; the positive aspects of the Kid's perception; the limitations of his perspectives as he senses them and as the reader sees them; and, finally, with the possibility that these eclogues constitute a necessary step in the process that eventually leads to Paradise in The Vanishing Point.

Crocus proves to be a highly sentimentalized Arcadia, well

removed from the war which ravages the rest of the world, where old men may look directly into the sun and where the breezes are almost always gentle ones that stir the windmill to creaking. Here, although nature threatens with the occasional drought or blizzard, she provides freely and bountifully to the denizens who talk much of work but are rarely seen doing it. In this idyllic place, the potential evil of Sam Botten, Mr. Ricky and Doc Toovey is quickly vanquished by the gentle power of Jake's ingenuity or Ma's school-teacherish look. This is the idyllic place which shelters the Kid, who knows little of the demonic face of man and nature.

Because the Kid is innocent, he is able to perceive the essential unity or coherence of his world in which man and nature and man and man are basically in harmony. Thus, the Kid sees one of the rare prairie dust storms as a sympathetic expression of his torment over Jake's apparent treachery:

The wind caught me full in the face, drove the dust clear into the corners of my eyes... . The whole sky was blown untidy with torn black pieces of cloud, and the night was real fierce with breathing. The sound was coming from a million miles away, and she was after every living thing. She was...Jake letting Mrs. Clinkerby talk about your baby like that, and not having any time to drown out gophers; she was awful!

¹W.O. Mitchell, Jake and the Kid (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), p. 59. Further references in this chapter are identified by page numbers in parentheses.

On the other hand it also seems to the Kid that nature gives expression to his sense of joy and exhilaration as it does the day that he rides his horse, "Auction Fever", for the first time: "All around us was the bald-headed prairie with the air soft and warm and the sky lifting up without a cloud in sight. A meadow lark sang to us" (27).

The Kid also sees his Arcadian friends in the same intimate relationship with nature, as the natural metaphors which he uses to describe them indicate. His comments about Molly and Gate serve to illustrate the point that he sees not only a parallel, but also a direct equation between man and nature:

Her eyes will put you in mind of those violets that are tangled up in prairie grass along about the end of April.

I guess she is the violet and old Gate is the dead grass. That's how they are. (91)

The identity which the citizens of Arcadia share with nature is, of necessity, an identity which they share with each other. The Kid is able to perceive this common human bond even when the dramatic necessities of the stories dictate that there must be antagonists as well as protagonists. Therefore, even though Doc Toovey attempts to trick the Kid in the all important race between Auction Fever and Spider, the Kid views him mildly as someone who has made nothing more than a slight error in judgment: "Doc Toovey ought to have known better. My Fever is a Gent. And Gents don't chew!" (142).

The same applies to Mr. Ricky who is much more of a threat because he conspires to buy the Kid's horse; none the less, the Kid

regards him neutrally, even at the most critical moment.

However, the Kid does not necessarily look with equanimity at those from outside Crocus; nevertheless, he can learn to perceive outsiders sympathetically. Miss Henchbaw is such an outsider who bewilders the Kid with her foreign insistence that the pure spring of truth should not be muddied by Jake's tall tales. When she is in danger of being fired from her position as a result of Mr. Ricky's machinations, the Kid responds with indignation and rises to her defence. Perhaps the Kid's capacity to see the essential unity of his world derives from the fact that he has not learned to reason, analyze and classify, preferring the subjective and imaginative perception that Jake's tall tales teach him. Perhaps this is why he is free to conceive of a world in which man, nature, foreigners and fantasies create a more or less harmonious coherence.

There are also limitations implicit in the Kid's perception and he senses these as boundaries beyond which he cannot go in his state. He discovers one of these barriers the day that he becomes aware of his Aunt Margaret's twenty-year-old charms. He sighs: "Even if she was my Aunt I wished I wasn't a kid and her growing older all the time I kept growing up" (17). Apparently the Kid senses that in his particular Arcadia, sexual maturity must be projected to some impossible future date; however, that is not to suggest that there is no room for the mother-child relationship, or for the pristine relationship of two innocents such as the one that Jake and the Kid experience. It also seems that the citizens of

Crocus must not be confronted by violence. Therefore, although it is clear that Sam Botten has committed devious and even violent crimes against Old MacLachlin, the Kid stops short of realizing just what has transpired and allows his attention to be deflected to more frivolous matters. Similarly, he and Jake never become aware that their annual spring gopher hunt is an essentially barbarous affair. Apparently, the citizens of Arcadia are not to look upon death either and therefore, when the Kid is forced to realize that his missing pup is probably dead, he finds himself strangely out of harmony with his surroundings. The whole of the prairie is alive with the sights and sounds of spring but he wishes himself dead, indicating that perhaps in this one instance he has moved outside the state of innocence. Nevertheless, he manages to return to Arcadia and when he is in danger of dying in the Christmas blizzard, he cannot conceive of this possibility and assures himself that he is getting his second warmth. On another occasion when the Kid senses that he is blundering toward some sort of analytical reasoning, he stops short. In this instance, Jake tries to give the Kid a "scientific" explanation of his rainmaking miracle, but at the first reference to dry ice, the Kid gladly reverts to the non-logic of Jake's tall tales:

"Ever hear tell a dry ice, Kid?"

I looked right back at him. "Sure," I said, "it was all over the prairies the year of the blue snow. That was when the dust all froze into solid cakes."

Jake looked at me kind of funny. He started to say something but he changed his mind.

He knows better than to try fooling me.

Thus it appears that the Kid senses that to approach sexual maturity, violence, death and reasoning is to approach the boundaries which define his harmonious state of innocence.

Perhaps it is the reader who becomes acutely aware of the Kid's limitations as the Kid plays the roles of the eclogue. Conventionally, rustics who only appear to be innocents lend their voices to dirges, love-lays, eulogies, singing matches and rustic dialogues and in doing so display a high degree of lyricism and subtlety of expression. In Mitchell's eclogues, the Kid, or his counterpart Jake, assumes these roles but betrays the poverty of his perception and expression. When the Kid launches into his version of a lament for Adonis, (which actually is a lament for his missing dog), the standards established by Bion, Milton and Shelley in their laments comment upon the Kid's superficiality:

He's dead now. I can't give any speech
about refugees because he was my pup.

You oughta seen him. He was red and
he was white. He was a he. Jake got him
for me. His ears sorta flopped but they
was gonna stand up when he got older.
He was a fox terrier... (12)

In the same lament, the Kid also betrays his own lack of subtlety by assuring his listeners that calves, colts, chicks and pups are the same as refugee kids. Similarly, when the Kid renders his version of the traditional love-lay, lamenting the blight of disappointed love since he thinks he has lost Jake to Mrs. Clinkerby, he reveals his limitations once again. All that he can really articulate is that he is feeling unhappy and that both he and Jake

seem different in some undefined way:

"The next couple of weeks, with Jake going around with his face all naked looking from so much shaving, I didn't feel so good. Jake he sure acted different; he didn't have any time to do anything with me; half the time he didn't answer me; you couldn't say he was exactly mean-Jake, he wouldn't hurt a fly. He went around acting like he wasn't him and I wasn't me.

(46)

By his own confession, the Kid's essay which eulogizes Jake is rambling and directionless: "That essay just rolled along like a tumbleweed" (178). Furthermore, although Jake possesses qualities of loyalty, ingenuity and sympathy that are worthy to be eulogized, the Kid does not perceive them and so talks instead of much lesser accomplishments: "I put down all about how Jake can tell the weather and witch water wells...I told how he could play the mandolin and sing "My Wild Rose of the Prairies" so you had a lump in your throat - how he was the fastest runner in the whole Northwest in his stocking feet" (178).

Apparently one does not become a more subtle innocent the longer one stays in Crocus for Jake, who is more or less an adult version of the Kid, does no better than the Kid would have with his contribution to the traditional singing match, which either offends or amuses with its vernacular language, strained meter and trite rhyme scheme:

"I ain't so fussy about the flowers,
 Growed by the April showers.
 Crocuses and buttercups
 And vilets and buffalo beans
 And flax flowers too,
 They ain't a patch on you.
 It's you I'm fussy about '
 It's you I can't do without.
 I gotta have you like rain after ten years drouth."

(24)

However, perhaps Jake does have an inkling that his rustic dialogues or tall tales leave something to be desired, for he concludes his tall tale about Albin, the oversized grasshopper, as follows:

"There," Jake said, "is thuh tragical part of it, Albin, he fell in love."

"Fell in love!"

"Yep. He was settin' in this here Dooley's back 40 one day an' he looked up an' seen one a them there four-engine bombers they're flyin' tuh Roosia. She was love at first sight. He took off, an' thuh last folks seen was two little black specks disappearin' tuh thuh North. Han' me that there manure fork will yuh, Kid?"

(104)

As it happens, Jake is not the only inhabitant of Crocus who suspects that there is something unattractive about such innocence. It is in her eulogy of Jake that Miss HENCHBAW makes the point most tellingly for she describes Jake in terms that evoke the aimiable but hollow scarecrow from the land of Oz: "He wears flat-soled boots, has chores in his blood, straw in his overall bib and binder-twine in his heart" (183). It would appear that Miss HENCHBAW senses something hollow, perhaps even grotesque, in the aged innocent and apparently the Kid does too for, in a moment of revelation,

he sees Jake's face as a strange squinting mask that hints of emptiness behind it: "Jake, our hired man, he didn't answer me right away, just looked at me with his mouth making like a round hole in the middle of his face; he was sort of squinting" (15). Therefore, it seems that not only Miss Henchbaw but also Jake and the Kid know the inadequacy and hollowness of the perpetual innocent. However, it is the reader, who is aware of the pastoral convention and its potential for lyricism and sophistication, who truly senses the limitations of the innocents of Crocus.

This chapter opens with the suggestion that the eclogues may perform a necessary role in the process that leads Mitchell from Who has seen the wind to The Vanishing Point. Possibly it was necessary for Mitchell to explore the nature of the innocent's perception, exposing its limitations in particular, before he was ready to move on to "Pastures new". Perhaps it was also necessary for Mitchell to broaden his definition of the innocent. Effectively, this is what his portrayal of the Kid accomplishes for the Kid emerges as an innocent who has more in common with Sean, Saint Sammy and the Bens than with Brian O'Connell. Whereas the Kid shares Brian's initial and fleeting sense of equanimity and harmony, he also displays many of the specific characteristics of those outside the garrison gates. They, like the Kid, are in some kind of harmony with nature: Sean knows instinctively how to protect his land from the effects of drought; Saint Sammy apparently has the power to direct the forces of nature against his enemies; and in Brian's eyes

the Young Ben is the embodiment of the prairie itself. They too seem to sense their identity with others of their kind and so, even though Brian is born inside the walls of the garrison, he is recognized and accepted by Sean, Saint Sammy and the Young Ben. Although Saint Sammy is actively hostile to the garrison forces, Sean and The Ben, like the Kid, display an ability to tolerate and even interact with "outsiders". All three are born story-tellers, who consistently muddy the pure spring of truth in much the same fashion as Jake does; Sean fabricates little men in "two inch overhaws"; Saint Sammy glibly produces his powerful conflation of barnyard and Bible; and The Ben stops itinerant travellers in their tracks with his "tall tales". These three are limited in their perception in the same manner as The Kid: Sean displays the rustics distaste for book-learning; Saint Sammy sees his world through deranged eyes which attach equal importance to underwear labels and horses; and The Ben usually sees only in terms of what is immediate and obvious.

The parallels between the Kid and these characters in Who has seen the wind are so definite that one concludes that in these eclogues the definition of innocence has been broadened so that it comprehends those outside the garrison gates and perhaps anticipates the innocence of Daddy Sherry, the dominant figure in The Kite. Significantly, when the protagonist of The Vanishing Point finally discovers his paradise "happier far", he finds himself in the company of innocents who recall Sean, Saint Sammy, The Bens and Daddy Sherry. Therefore, one assumes that the Jake and the Kid

stories may be an integral part of the process that leads from Eden to Paradise.

CHAPTER IV
OUT OF LIMBO

Even as Mitchell was writing his Jake and the Kid eclogues, it would seem that he was also experimenting with other forms of fiction. Apparently some of the experiments were not successful and, therefore, one might surmise that Mitchell may have experienced some difficulty in departing from the well defined conventions of the eclogue and its idyllic setting. The titles of two proposed novels, The Alien and Roses are Difficult Here, suggest that they were indeed intended to deal with the postlapsarian world. However, The Alien never appeared in hard cover, being only partially published in Maclean's magazine, and Mitchell acknowledges that Roses are Difficult Here was one of two times when he "missed the trapeze".¹

¹W.O. Mitchell discusses The Alien and Roses are Difficult Here in a letter to me dated March 22, 1974.

Although one can only speculate about the reasons for artistic failure, The Kite, which was published a year after Jake and the Kid, suggests that Mitchell may have been ambivalent about the validity of a variety of modes of perception. It has been noted that The Kite is a complex work. The voice of a would-be philosopher narrates the events which assume the contours of a romance and yet, Daddy Sherry, the dominant figure, seems to spring from the imaginative mind of a novelist. It would appear that this hybrid romance, Menippean satire and novel may, in part, constitute an experiment with the matter of perception. Ultimately, the emotional perspective of the romancer and the intellectual perspective of the philosopher are both challenged by the vital figure, Daddy Sherry. Therefore, it would seem that The Kite validates the superiority of the imagination which has the power to give shape and coherence to bits and pieces of experience, conceiving a viable personality such as Daddy Sherry. It would also appear that the kite, the major motif of the work, contributes to this particular view for it too becomes a high-flying, living thing precisely because a craftsman gives wood, paper and string both proportion and coherence. Although The Kite appears to elevate the imaginative perspective, it does not overlook the perspective of the innocent for Daddy Sherry has his own brand of innocence which expands the definition of that state. Apparently, in The Kite, several paths are explored and several definite steps taken which lead from the Arcadia of Jake and the Kid to the Paradise of The Vanishing Point.

The contours of The Kite are those of a romantic quest in which David Lang, a Twentieth Century version of 'the knight errant, successfully sallies forth in search of that which will quicken his creative powers. If Margaret Atwood is correct in suggesting that Canadians in general, and Canadian explorers and artists in particular, are troubled by their inability to articulate what it is that they have seen, then The Kite deals, as romances do, with the projected ideals and wishfulfilment of the contemporary society.² In conformity with the conventions of the romance, David Lang must wrest the treasure, which presumably has the power to render him articulate, from a formidable father figure, Daddy Sherry. Predictably, David passes through the usual perilous journey, which in his case is an airplane flight haunted by the spectres of explosions and crashes. He then moves on to the preliminary adventures in which he establishes himself in Shelby, locates Daddy Sherry and propitiates the local powers. Finally, he reaches the critical struggle with death in which he convinces Daddy Sherry that he must not die before he has revealed his secret. Having been successful in this crucial battle, David emerges triumphantly and experiences the promise of regeneration on several levels.

It appears that Mitchell views his protagonist in the manner of a romancer and yet he undermines David Lang and his quest in a

²Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 107-125; pp. 177-193.

variety of ways, which suggests a certain ambivalence about the validity of the romancer's perspective. Mitchell places David Lang, a very conventional, stylized figure of the romance, against Daddy Sherry who is not only the repository of the treasure that David seeks but also a viable and credible character in his own right. Therefore David, the protagonist, pales beside Daddy Sherry and, as a consequence, the focus of the novel shifts from David to Daddy as Catherine McLay notes in her essay, "The Kite: A study in Immortality".³ In addition, while David quests through Shelby in search of someone to cast light on Daddy's profound secret, he is repeatedly confronted by the evidence that Daddy is far from being the image of the ideal, as the object of a quest usually is. Instead, he is a thoroughly basic, willful and cantankerous old man, who likes his cigars and his scotch and attributes his longevity to buttermilk, pigweed, keeping regular and keeping out of draughts. There are three major stages to the prototypic quest, as Frye indicates in his "The Mythos of Summer" in Anatomy of Criticism,⁴ but David is allowed to complete only the first two, agon and pathos, stopping short of anagnorisis. Therefore, David Lang is never recognized and elevated. Presumably one could conclude that Mitchell finds something lacking in the romancer's perspective for he permits

³Catherine McLay, "The Kite: A Study in Immortality," Journal of Canadian Fiction, II, No. 2 (Spring 1973), pp. 43-48.

⁴Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 187.

his hero to pale before the more vital Daddy Sherry; he indicates that the thoroughly basic and human Daddy Sherry is the one who possesses the power to quicken David's powers; and he does not allow his nominal hero to proceed to the last stage of the quest.

It has been noted that The Kite not only conforms to some of the conventions of romance but also to those of Menippean satire. In the context of this discussion, the most significant of these conventions is the ridiculing of the philosopher. This appears to be achieved by allowing the narrator, the protagonist and the minor characters to intellectualize about Daddy Sherry, and the events which concern him. The narrator frequently declaims over the events which transpire. Typically, the meeting organized to plan Daddy Sherry's birthday party is described in grand terms of mythological pasts, man and Methuselah:

David had the feeling that he was in touch with something old and elemental; all shared a synthesizing insight such as drops over a congregation at the taking of communion or holy sacrament; all made their obeisance to the eternal ancestors of a mythological past when man was ageless; they planned a party for Methuselah.

In fact, every episode and anecdote clearly has a special burden or significance and the reader is nudged to be sure that he does not

⁵W.O. Mitchell, The Kite (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962), p. 71. Further references in this chapter are identified by page numbers in parentheses.

miss it. Title Jack's recollection of the Paradise Valley episode concludes quite typically with the moral of the lesson being provided by Mr. Suttee:

"Anybody ever figure out how come he's lived so long? I suppose they've all got an answer for it. Me too. Now. You know what I think? It's because he just doesn't give a damn for unimportant things." Mr. Suttee stared at Title Jack for a moment.

"Things like half a million dollars." That was what had frightened Title Jack Dalgliesh.

(123)

Similarly, the novel ends with David's moment of revelation and once again there is a pontificating voice which proclaims the lesson which the action of the book has already dramatized, not once, but several times:

Now he knew what it was that Daddy had for him - the astonishingly simple thing the old man had to say - and had said through the hundred and eleven years of his life - between the personal deeds of his birth and his death, knowing always that the string was thin - that it could be dropped - that it could be snapped. He had lived always with the awareness of his own mortality.

(209)

The citizens of Shelby also get involved intellectualizing for they clamour to explain to David just why it is that Daddy has managed to live so long. Each explanation is offered in the earnest tones of a character who is sharing his most profound insights about life. The barber assures David that Daddy's longevity can

be attributed to the pure dry air of the foot-hills; the doctor displays his encyclopaedic knowledge on the subject of the aging, and explains that Daddy's aging continuum must have been determined by the unusually strong germ plasm from which he started; the minister theorizes that Daddy has managed to live to a venerable age because he has become the personification of "Freedom" and Mr. Suttee talks of Daddy's contempt for material things. Helen also has a Sherry explanation for she attributes his longevity to his appetite for surprise. None the less, she is also the one who points out the utter futility of trying to intellectualize or philosophize about Daddy Sherry. As David gropes for the significance of the old man's life, she explains that Daddy is as inscrutable as the rhythms of nature for he has been shaped by the seasons, the lunar cycle and earth, leaf, grass, water and sky.

Helen clarifies the fact that the object of The Kite's satire is the very process of intellectualizing or philosophizing, in which the narrator, protagonist and minor characters have been involved. However, it is not Helen's comment alone which underlines the object of the satire. The collection of Sherry explanations comment upon themselves. Whereas each may contain a modicum of truth, each is clearly incomplete in itself and bears little or no relation to the other explanations. Thus it appears that the most that the combined philosophizing intellect of barber, doctor, minister, businessman and favoured grand-daughter can do is to cast separate and feeble light on the figure of Daddy Sherry. Daddy too

has his say on the matter of intellectualizing. On the occasion of his birthday party, the whole town solemnly assembles, all too ready to elevate him to some higher plane, but the narrator's assurance that "a higher reality ... was to be revealed" (203) proves to be ironic, for Daddy insists on being neither more nor less than his usual cantankerous self and effectively destroys the solemn ceremony in the process. Apparently Daddy knows instinctively what David also seems to sense as he looks from the window of the plane over an exquisitely pure panorama of clouds. The rarified atmosphere of higher realities, ideas and concepts is "quite unsatisfactory, this celestial neighborhood too rare and lonely, proper province only for the eagle and the hawk" (6).

Daddy exposes the limitations of the romancer and the philosopher precisely because he is the vital creation of a novelist, a fully portrayed character seen in the context of his society. It would be impossible to ignore the unpredictable old man who contemplates marriage in his nineties; reminisces the good old days of the Riel Rebellion and of Paradise Valley; tyrannizes his housekeeper; and goes fishing and goose hunting. Not content with these activities, Daddy insists that he should be allowed to try out Keith's trapeze and plans a trip to the tropics; however, he eventually accepts the excitement of a prairie flood as a reasonable substitute for tropical adventure. Despite the fact that Daddy is difficult, it is apparent that, over his long life time, he has established himself a place in the town of Shelby. Citizens set their

clocks, predict the weather and plant their crops by him. Furthermore, there are many individuals who apparently have a special rapport with the old man and will go to the most elaborate extremes to satisfy his whim. In fact, the entire community of Shelby is concerted in its efforts to celebrate the old man's birthday. It is the irascible Daddy Sherry who emerges unscathed, from the tangle of fictional forms that comprise The Kite, exposing the limitations of the romancer and philosopher and validating the perspective of the novelist who has the imagination to conceive Daddy, "one of the enduring old folk of literature".⁶

The Kite treats the matter of perception in that the perspectives of the romancer, philosopher and the novelist are explored and in that David Lang struggles to gain the insight which quickens his creative powers. It also concerns itself with innocence for, despite his one hundred eleven years, Daddy retains his innocent perspective. In the terms of Jake and the Kid, Daddy should not be in the state of innocence because he has consciously crossed the boundaries which define it. He knows sexual maturity, violence and death for he recalls the Riel Rebellion, remembering even its subtle indignities; he cherishes the memory of Ramrod, his long dead friend; and he carefully guards the secret of Victoria Binestettner who died giving birth to their child. However, Daddy is a literal but

⁶Catherine McLay, "The Kite: A Study in Immortality," Journal of Canadian Fiction, II, No. 2 (Spring 1973), pp. 43-48.

not a figurative expatriate from Paradise Valley for he retains many of the attributes of the innocent. Clearly he is in harmony with nature for the folk of Shelby forecast the weather and plant their crops by him and when everyone else flees before a threatening flood, Daddy stays and finds exhilaration in riding nature's demonic powers. Also, Daddy is in harmony with his own kind, Ramrod, Keith and Helen, but he is actively hostile to the garrison forces that militate against his freedoms with their expressions of apparent solicitude. None the less, Daddy can tolerate and even accept outsiders providing they do not trespass on his freedom. Although Daddy is apparently quite conscious that others filter experience through logical, ordering minds, he chooses his own erratic and subjective view of history and finds it relaxing to lapse into disjointed ramblings which make sense to him but not to others. It seems that Daddy is an innocent very much like Jake, the Kid, Sean, Saint Sammy and The Bens in that he manifests their sense of harmony with man and nature, their general antipathy toward garrison forces, and their preference for a highly subjective view of experience. Nevertheless, he differs from all of them in that he not only has crossed the boundaries which Jake and the Kid have not, but also has crossed them consciously as Sean, Saint Sammy and The Bens apparently have not. Thus the person of Daddy Sherry expands the definition of innocence so that it only faintly echoes Brian O'Connell's initial innocence and instead is broad enough to include the people of Paradise who populate Mitchell's subsequent novel, The Vanishing Point.

CHAPTER V

PERCEIVING PARADISE

In 1973 The Vanishing Point was published fulfilling the promise implied in Who has seen the wind and proclaiming a tentative solution to the problem of making sense of a world which seems repressive, divided, demonic and absurd. None the less, certain aspects of the novel appear to carry the burden of Mitchell's earlier experiments with the perception of the romancer, the philosopher and the innocent and these will be given brief consideration before the narrative technique and the development of the protagonist are considered.

When the narrator and the protagonist refer to such diverse subjects as the magic lantern, Esau's talent for self-erasure, the dance tent and the television screen, they seem to comment upon the limitations of the romancer's perception. Sometimes the passages imply the type of criticism that one might expect of an Aristotlean or Platonic philosopher who sees the ideal man as a rationalist or as a philosopher-king. For the six-year-old Carlyle, the rather

limited magic of the magic lantern resides in the fact that it enables him to project and enlarge disjointed images of himself. In this, he resembles the romancer who also projects his various wishes, fears and ideals in the separate figures of his story. Although there is no particular criticism of this process implied in the magic lantern episode itself, there is in Carlyle's observations of Old Esau engaged in his act of self-erasure:

Esau-trout-trout-Esau. God, how he envied him his primitive talent for self-erasure, if it saved him from melancholy, from flesh and spirit pain. Did he achieve oneness with eternity? - what an overblown way to explain sun-warmed stupor in which half-thoughts and fragment dreams are projected against no time, lighted up, shaded and faded and vanished to light up again. Not too much different from steers and cows with absently moving¹ jaws - or the bull trout - or the fungus.

In this passage, the reader may not ignore the equations drawn between Esau and the trout, the steers, the cows and fungus, nor the reduction of his activity from a potentially transcendental one to a sun-warmed stupor in which he seems to project, in the manner of a magic lantern or romancer, half-thoughts and fragment dreams which light up and fade in an apparently endless cycle. If the reader is acquainted with the writings of Aristotle, this particular passage may evoke a discussion in the Nicomachean Ethics in which

¹W.O. Mitchell, The Vanishing Point (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 136. Further references in this chapter are identified by page numbers in parentheses.

the philosopher equates the most base of men with cattle. Furthermore, he suggests that the real function of man is not merely the act of living, which vegetables do, nor experiencing of sensations, which the whole of brute creation does, but is rather to engage actively in the process of reasoning. However, with or without Aristotlean echoes, Mitchell's description could hardly be said to validate Esau's stupor. Since Esau's state is described in language which also suggests the process of the romancer, the condemnation would seem to apply equally to the romancer.

In the description of the dance tent, there is a direct reference to the magic lantern and the flickering shadows of the tent are described in a manner which recalls Esau's shading, fading, vanishing dreams:

Before he reached the bridge over Beulah Creek, he could see the long glow of the dance tent through the trees; magic-lantern shadows were thrown against the walls and slope roof, swelled, contracted, vanished, reappeared gigantically. Just before the tent flap he tripped at a guy rope, caught himself, stooped to enter.

(380)

The reader presumes that the fact that Carlyle trips and stoops in order to enter the dance tent may imply a condemnation of the world of the romancer which also is a world of shadows.

The television screen is depicted as a surface on which magic lantern reflections dance like the shadows of the tent and like Old Esau's projections. They too form growing-decaying-swift-gliding patterns:

Weesackashack's patrons sat side-saddle on their chrome stools, their eyes turned up to the television screen high on a corner shelf at the end of the bar. Violence and grace growing-decaying-swift, gliding patterns forming-flowing-breaking-re-forming. Pretty smart trick with a whole continent watching in the dimness of their dead little Willis's toy rooms all together watching the magic-lantern reflections dancing there.

(367)

In this passage there is a new note of condemnation added in the reference to the whole continent apparently shackled in "their dead little Willis's toy rooms". This seems to evoke Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and its image of men shackled to the belief that the illusory shadows which they see reflected there are, in fact, reality. Perhaps Mitchell, like Plato, would suggest that the philosopher-king, who escapes the cave and looks upon the blinding light of truth, is one who performs the function truly appropriate to man. It seems that the reservations about a romancer's perspective first expressed in The Kite are given much fuller expression in The Vanishing Point. However, it appears that it is not particularly easy to leave the shadowy dream-world of projected ideals and wishfulfillment for Carlyle Sinclair, the protagonist of The Vanishing Point, is first seen in the slow process of waking as though he were reluctant to leave the dream world behind him.

Although The Vanishing Point appears to evoke Aristotlean and Platonic standards to cast an unfavorable light upon the romancer's perception, the novel is by no means unqualified in its praise of

the intellectual or philosophical perspective. The world into which Carlyle awakes is not one which invites intellectualizing. Rather the waking world is vibrantly and chaotically alive and demands that it be perceived by the senses rather than the intellect. The drumming of the ruffed grouse assails the ears; leaf mould and wet earth address themselves to the olfactory sense; cold floors assert themselves through the sense of touch and the stove with its glow of coals appeals to the eye. This is Paradise, a world which is not only concretely alive but also defies the order which the philosopher-kings would impose upon it. The indigenous citizens of Paradise frustrate the attempts of Fyfe, Saunders and Sinclair to actualize the ideal in the reality of the Indian reservation. Fyfe's minimal-subsistence cookies litter the schoolhouse floor; Saunder's medical assistance is often offered in vain; and Sinclair finds he must manipulate and coerce to implement his plans to improve Paradise. However, the defiance which greets the nutritionist, doctor and teacher does not diminish the obvious values of these practical applications of intellectual enlightenment; rather it serves to emphasize the enormity of the gulf between the ideal and the real. Even Archie Nicofine, who is willing to accept the validity of medical, mechanical and agricultural knowledge, does so with difficulty. The Vanishing Point, like The Kite, seems to emphasize that the vision of the intellectual is indeed alien to the vigorous and unpredictable denizens of Paradise.

The inhabitants of Paradise are innocents, much like Daddy

Sherry. Apparently they too have consciously experienced sexual maturity, violence and death and yet they manage to maintain a kind of harmony with nature and with each other. However, their perception also appears to be limited. Carlyle indicates that these innocents may have the capacity to perceive nature in such a way that they achieve oneness with eternity but the suggestion is cancelled by Carlyle's reduction of Old Esau's contemplation to a sun-warmed stupor, in which Esau is merely a brooding subject indistinguishable from the object of his contemplation. "Esau-trout-trout-Esau" (136). Apparently the denizens of Paradise can perceive the Bony Spectre, Wendigo, Wizard and Witch in the forms of nature but these perceptions prove to be fantasies which are altered and abandoned at will; it seems that they are not, and perhaps never were, part of a comprehensive Indian mythology which could lend shape and coherence to the human experience. However, the Indian stories do have much in common with the charming fantasies of which Sean and Brian and Jake and the Kid are capable. The children of Paradise prove to be excellent artists who faithfully and literally reproduce what they see around them: wild delphinium and tiger lilies; tractors, hay balers, trucks and horses; above all horses. But Carlyle notes that the children's drawings are usually framed by the mountains which enclose their valley. In a like manner, their perception is also circumscribed in that usually they do not see beyond physical barriers and in that their vision excludes that of the philosopher-kings who live beyond the mountains and wage war against the aspects of life

that seem to be demonic. When Carlyle at last dances to the innocent and natural rhythms of the drum, he realizes that he undergoes a kind of lobotomy and accepts a kind of perception which comprehends cold, disease, starvation and licence as inevitable aspects of life.

Although The Vanishing Point exposes the limitations of the romancer, philosopher and innocent, it validates the imaginative perception of the creative artist. The Kite implies that the artist is an artificer who gives shape and coherence to bits and pieces of experience. The Vanishing Point suggests an even more complex perception which incorporates the implications of The Kite and comprehends the perspective of the romancer, philosopher and innocent. Presumably, the power of this imagination is sufficient to rescue both the creator and the object of his creation from the oblivion implied by the presiding motif of the novel, the vanishing point. It is Carlyle who explicitly articulates this concept of the imagination in his lyrical address to the Powderface Child:

Dear little bare-bum shaman, I am here--I'm standing here. Oh let me show you to you--I want to mirror you so that you may be more nearly true! Please perform your marvels for me--surprise me. Astonish me with your accidents. Trust me now. I promise you, I won't destroy you with distorted image... Let's you and I conjure together. You watch me and I'll watch you and I will show you how to show me how to show you how to do our marvellous human tricks together!

In this passage one hears the voice of a one time romancer who has turned from introversion and subjectivity to extroversion and objectivity, for the mirror that was once turned inward, in the manner of a magic lantern, is now turned outward to image the world. The emotions, that once might have shaped what is perceived, now only lend an emotional color to the object of perception. Thus Carlyle turns his mirror on the Powderface Child whom he sees realistically and dispassionately as a child with bare buttocks, black-fly bites and an inadequate undershirt. Nevertheless, his speech to the child is a lyrical one colored by his own emotional responses to the potential object of his creation. As he addresses the child, Carlyle speaks of mirroring him so that he may be "more nearly true" and therefore suggests that his new-found imaginative perspective enables him to perceive the essential nature of what he sees. It would seem then that his new perception comprehends that of the philosopher. Carlyle also seems to have acquired the innocent's sense of unity or harmony, for his speech to the child is informed by the metaphor which implies that he and the child are bound together as conspirators in the magic art of mirroring "reality". This metaphor not only unifies Carlyle and the child but effectively harmonizes the passage with the metaphor of the carnival which informs the entire novel. Apparently the new-found imagination embodies the perception of the romancer, philosopher and innocent, and gives birth to synthesizing metaphor, all of which may well assist the artificer in defying the threat of oblivion.

This passage not only serves to define the nature of Carlyle's new perception but also to describe the narrative techniques of The Vanishing Point. Mitchell, like Carlyle, apparently responds to the objects of his creation but, at the same time, he maintains a kind of objectivity which enables him to perceive the "true" nature of his protagonist's experience. He perceives Carlyle engaged in the essential quest of all mythic heroes who must find the answer to three questions: "'Where do I come from? Where am I bound? What must I do now to get there?'"² In order to emphasize that Carlyle's story is one of the recurrent human dramas, allusions are made to other variations of the human story. The old Indian, who embodies the spirit of the once great hunters of the prairie, is named Esau. Thus he recalls the Biblical Esau, the other hunter who also loses his birthright to the paler brother; puts that brother to flight, and lives to see him come offering gifts and seeking reconciliation. The Vanishing Point also resounds with allusions to Alice in Wonderland. Norman Catface's scarred, smiling face and his function as a guide in the revival tent recalls the smile of the Cheshire Cat and its role as a guide through another bewildering and grotesque Wonderland. Similarly, Carlyle's refrain, "little lost lamb, Victoria" (115) echoes Blake's "Songs of Experience", "The Little Girl Lost" and "A Little Girl Lost", both of which speak of an apocalyptic vi-

² Harry Slochower, Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 15.

sion which approximates the one that Carlyle finally achieves.

For all that The Vanishing Point emphasizes the essential and recurrent nature of Carlyle's experience, the very specific realities of the Canadian scene do not escape the narrator's eye. The Canadian reader may recognize his own world in the descriptions of myopic, self-important bureaucrats; discarded cars, lawn ornaments and signs that litter the highways from Paradise to any city; sterile, concrete business districts; glossy supermarkets; and the carnival air of the faith healing tent. Perhaps the most familiar of all is the atmosphere of despair that settles over those in Carnival City who feel themselves caught in a system which propels them in futile circles.

Mitchell is also like Carlyle in the sense that he seems responsive to the objects of his creation. The following passage serves to illustrate the point:

Mountain spring exploded in his face. Fifteen years and he still wasn't emotionally ready for the chinook stirring over his cheek and breathing compassion through the inner self that had flinched and winced for months from the alienating stun of winter. Full reprieve! Smell, Sinclair - smell leaf mould and wet earth, singing with the menthol of spruce, bitter with the iodine edge of willow smoke from Esau's stove pipe! The old man was still alive and it was Saturday morning - into-the-city day - Victoria day!

Here Mitchell, using the voice of his narrator, consciously creates

impressions of spring. However, he seems to respond to the scene that he creates and he turns to share it with Carlyle. Subsequently, Carlyle's boisterous voice takes over the passage. The fact that Mitchell, through his narrator, addresses his protagonist and gives way to him suggests that there may be some kind of an identification between the two. At the very least, it must be acknowledged that Mitchell is unmistakably responsive to the objects of his creation. Perhaps the author's general receptivity is what gives rise to the imaginative use of two controlling metaphors, one for each of the societies he creates. Certainly it is these metaphors which give coherence to the portrayal of Carlyle's complex and divided world.

It appears that Paradise Valley is seen as an awesome mother who is characterized by her capacity to give birth, somewhat explosively, to her diverse progeny. Early in the novel, as Carlyle walks through Paradise, he experiences her awesome power. Mountain spring explodes in his face; magpies fly up from the ground; and shooting stars burst from the earth. Even the green hills seem to surge into prominence and Carlyle imagines himself as a young grizzly emerging from a cave. These are the mother's gentle offspring. She also spawns her children in their demonic forms. There are the blow-flies which rise from the stinking guts which suddenly loom before Carlyle and the stench of hydrogen sulphide which escapes from every flaring vent in the Paradise oil field. This is a mother whose very being must incorporate both the benign and the demonic.

It appears that the people of Paradise are the children of

this awesome mother as were Sean, Saint Sammy, The Bens and Daddy Sherry. They have her exuberance and fecundity, for even the whispers of the Grade Three pupils lisp of "young bodies epileptic in sweet grass fishy with semen-eager legs in denim-tangle of cotton skirts and underclothes ripped" (377). When Carlyle undertakes to impose the order of a school regime on the community, the children fly to the shelter of the bush and to the protective branches of the trees. When they dance, it is to the rhythms of the prairie chicken, the owl, the rabbit, the rhythms of the prairie herself. The people of Paradise, like their mother, can also erupt into violence, as Harold Left Hand does when he confronts Carlyle with his drawn knife. They also are capable of nature's wanton acts of wastefulness and thus, through their indifference, thousands of acres of badly needed oats are never harvested. Even the smells associated with the people of Paradise, which continually assail Carlyle, proclaim kinship with the earth. None the less, perhaps because they have strayed away from Beulah and the old and allegedly Edenic ways, the people of Paradise know a despair which is given voice in the first hymn that Carlyle hears the parishoners of Paradise sing. "Rescue the Perishing, care for the dying". And they are dying as the annual spring inventory reveals:

Moses Rider died of pneumonia in early May, and Sarah MacLeod and her unborn child; the bony spectre finally rode up for Jonas One-Spot the night the ice went out of the Spray. Each spring death seemed to play a counterpoint to bud and sprout and rising sap and river flow.

Apparently all is not well, even for the children of Paradise. Indeed, the suffering of both body and soul is great enough so that Ezra turns to his perfidious white brother for help even though he knows, as Carlyle does, that Ottawa sends "nurses and Xray machines for the hart that pants for cooling streams" (384). Actually, it is ultimately the earth-mother who provides a balm for her children. Her rhythms teach them the lobotomy of the drum and she allows them "self-erasure" in a "sun-warmed stupor" to ease "flesh and spirit pain" (136).

The white society is, apparently, viewed as a garrison culture which endeavors to impose its sense of order on the people of Paradise. Its agents are men such as Fyfe who sees his forty-five years with the department of Indian affairs as forty-five years of having "Held the fort" (88). However, this is secondary to the more obvious fact that the white society is conceived as a diabolic carnival. It is this metaphor which not only gives coherence to the complex, multiple forms of white society but also shapes the narrative contours of the novel. . .

It should be noted that the carnival has its origins partly in the Roman Saturnalia, an orgiastic fertility rite complete with phallic symbols, inversions or reversals of the accustomed order and a sense of hurly-burly created by counterpoint and the mixing of disparate elements, all of which is calculated to unleash the passions and to guarantee that the cosmic forces bring about the annual regeneration of life. It will be demonstrated that many of these

carnival elements are to be found in the description of the nameless city of the novel which, for the purposes of this study, is designated as Carnival City. Similarly, the Twentieth Century midway also seems to lend its conventions to Carnival City for there are evocations of the house of horrors, the shooting-gallery and the circus tent, complete with its freak show. The Roman Saturnalia and the midway are clearly not diabolic in themselves, inasmuch as those who enter understand that the carnival is merely a temporary disruption of the accustomed order, or perhaps a way out of time. The carnival becomes diabolic when it becomes the accustomed and inescapable order of things in which people writhe in endless torment or know themselves to be caught up in some kind of limbo or in perpetuating the horror.

Just as the carnival informs the portrayal of the city, so it seems to control the narrative movement of the novel. The circle, which is common to both the fertility dance of the Saturnalia and to the merry-go-round and ferris wheel of the midway, seems to be the figure which describes some of the contours of Carlyle's quest. Similarly the spiral, which is directly related to the carnival inasmuch as both may signify a temporary suspension of the order of things, describes the nature of Carlyle's descent into his own past and into Carnival City. Thus this metaphor gives coherence to a complex story.

Even as Carlyle approaches Carnival City, it assumes a diabolic aspect for the orange flames of the oil fields create the

impression of a "Name-fitful purgatory" (98). Within the city Heally Richards, the faith healer, proclaims that it is hell indeed and he proceeds with his inventory of hades which might be an inventory of any midway:

Hell was real; he had faith in Hell. He even knew how Hell smelled - french fries and Milkyway chocolate bars... There were two distinct stages to Hell - first the carnival one - Blue Eyes-Brown Eyes-pink tits-brown tits-the human pincushion pulls a half ton truck with a steel spear thrust through his skin - runs six meat skewers through his tongue and feels not the slightest tingle of pain or even discomfort. Nerves rotted with tertiary syphilis... Lizard Lady with her snake eyelids... Incaboy Pinhead - fiddle the Arkansas Traveller backwards - Blue Eyes whose beauty drives all men mad. Oh yes, he knew carnny Hell and its citizens. And he knew the second stage too. Skid-row Hell.

(270)

Carnival City is suitably dominated by the Devonian Tower, a giant, concrete phallus which is an appropriately sterile fertility symbol for the diabolic carnival:

Far ahead, the Devonian Tower thrust with stiff arrogance fully a third higher than the tallest of the office buildings around; from the broad cylindrical base the concave slope sides soared six hundred feet so that its glass revolving restaurant...floated above traffic smog. Pretty nearly the only six-hundred-foot concrete erection in the British Commonwealth. With a May basket balanced on its tip - that twinkled with coloured lights at night.

(42)

Carlyle discovers that to enter the city, presided over by such a tower, is to enter the inverted and reversed world of the carnival. He finds himself confronted by the lonely accoster in the hospital who is convinced that his heart works backwards. The accoster imagines that there are many others whose brains work in reverse and whose eyes and ears are turned inward and still others who breathe in when they should be breathing out and a host of people who are left-handed rather than right-handed. Nor is the lonely accoster alone in thinking that he is in an inverted world, for there are those who note that the Reverend Heally Richards, resplendent in his white shoes, socks, pants, suitcoat, vest, tie, shirt and Cadillac, "Looks just like a goddam photograph negative" (73). Holly also seems to be a pale reversal of her dusky roommate, Victoria, for she is so pale that Carlyle observes that even the slightest fatigue bruises her eyes. Saunders bluntly notes that whereas Aunt Pearl may have "shit" white the people of Paradise "shit" black. He also suggests to Carlyle that in directing Victoria to the city to train as a nurse he may be pointing her backward and Carlyle discovers that the Carnival City is some kind of hall of distorting mirrors that makes the people of Paradise appear to be backward persons.

The city is also rendered a carnival through the use of carnival techniques which create a carnival sense of hurly-burly. Counterpoint is used in the chapter in which Archie Nicotine is arrested for indecent exposure even as Heally Richards prepares for

his evangelizing broadcast. Richards unbuckles his belt, pulls down his zipper, drops the microphone cord inside his trousers and wiggles it obscenely down his leg. There is also the counterpoint of Richards' hellfire-and-brimstone sermon and Gloria Catface's negotiations as a prostitute. Eventually the two events collide in the following sequence:

"But oh, my friends there is a Hell
 - and the price of sin comes very high!"
 "That'll be thirteen ninety-five."
 Gloria Catface said to the young man
 with the acne-ravaged face.

(75)

Similarly, the carnival custom of mixing disparate elements seems to inform the creation of the doorman at the Foothills Carleton Hotel for he is described as "an impossible cross-fertilization between beefeater and medicine man; he wore a long, scarlet tunic, but the beef eater hat had been replaced by a shabby, buffalo-horned, medicine-man head-dress" (248). Here is a grotesque, carnival combination of hybrid plant, and a vestigial reminder of the British Empire topped off by a mangy Indian head-dress, all seen in the lurid light of a gas flare. Archie Nicotine is fascinated by another carnival conflation of disparate elements which he discovers in the department store. Carlyle finds him staring at the plastic nether parts of a woman in panty-hose:

It was as though she had trustingly lain back to do her bicycle exercises on the counter, and someone had taken a completely successful swipe at her with a scimitar. Truncated, she rested on her waist stump; knees gracefully bent, toes pointed, one leg almost outstretched. Through the tipped and proffered crotch, looping down and around the buttocks' cheeks, hung garlands of pearl necklace.

(61)

This is an unsettling mixture of the graceful and macabre, the fanciful and the real. However, it is by means of such improbable mixtures and through the use of counterpoint, that the novel takes on the hurly-burly quality of a carnival.

The carnival is calculated to unleash the passions and indeed the city does so. There are the urgent passions of the acne-ravaged young man, the seething hatred of Gloria Catface and the explosive violence of Archie Nicotine who slits Norman's face. It is Heally Richards who is truly diabolic for he inflames the passionate desire of his flock to be shriven of mortality, to be freed of the terrible burden of humanity. However, he can no more satisfy the desires that he inflames than he can restore life to the dying Esau, for he is, after all, merely an agent of the sterile city. The violent and frustrated passions aroused in Carnival City are necessarily barren as one might expect of a Carnival dominated by a concrete phallus.

The portrayal of Carnival City is also informed by the Twentieth Century midway. Carlyle has to do no more than stop at the traffic lights in order to be reminded of a house of horrors

with its slanted floors tipped against gravity and its dangling suggestion of spider webs:

They made such work out of walking, as though the pavement were tipped against them, and all were engaged in a communal pantomime illusion of walking up an invisible slope. Some of the women did seem to be ... persistently but unsuccessfully trying to brush off a webbing that had caught at their skirts and was trailing behind them.

(57-58)

In the department store, Carlyle finds a shooting-gallery as he watches the rising line of people on an escalator and sees them as the rabbit, duck and four-leaf clover targets:

There should have been the flat, crackling whap of .22 target rifles, the spice-sting of gun powder acrid in the air. The fat, worried woman with the nearly albino child, the narrow-shouldered man with the tragic face mask ... the two clown-faced and giggling teenagers - one after another they should ring and stiffly flip over backwards and out of sight...

(61)

And, of course, there is also a circus tent in Carnival City and, although it carries a banner announcing that God is not dead, it still seems to proclaim its original suggestion of freaks and wild animals. Inside the tent, Heally Richards sniffs "the old carnival and revival salad of crushed grass and sun-warmed canvas stung with the vinegar of sweat" (346), and it is not long before the pathetic freak show begins with a parade of people reduced to being vehicles

for their ailments. There are shoulder bursitis, two arthritic bouquets of fingers, a child with a prize-fighter face, constipation, prostate glands, cataracts, and finally Old Esau, all but dead, his face swallowed by the scarlet, and yellow eagle-feather war bonnet. It is in the circus tent that Carlyle sees the lowest level of hell, for here the tormented are naked in their agony as they lie wrestling with Heally, an inflated parody of Jacob's angel:

Many ... were lifting their arms with palms up and asking. They wanted the impossible, and he promised to shrive them of their mortality, to lift from them the terrible burden of their humanity, the load of their separateness. Now their bodies lay at his feet with arms and legs twitching. They moaned; they whimpered; they gibbered childhood echolallen.

(358)

As a child, Carlyle had supposed that the city, which even then seemed to him to be a perpetual carnival, could never be frightening. As an adult, he knows its horror. He not only sees its inhabitants writhing in agony but he also sees those frozen, by the diabolic power of the carnival, into ludicrous statues:

Statues - oh God, yes - that was it - bodies frozen - here and the bus-depot people and the Stonys - all men - held frozen. They must not move - they could not move - not a muscle - not an eyelid. Thrown into positions that were so often ludicrous - ...

(302)

And he discovers that those who are not in the pit of hell or caught

in the limbo of the bus depot may be committed to perpetuating the sterile consumer system of the city: o

They were born in Infants' Wear; they grew up through the difficult and insecure years of adolescence in Teen Town; were married in Bridal Bells. They bought their contraceptives and douches and sanitary napkins in Drugs; ate and slept in Furniture and Bedding... What the hell happened to them when they died though? Ah - that explained city parks - hidden people cemeteries actually, and the geometrically exact flower beds with mounding earth fortresses were graves.

(61-62)

This diabolic carnival of the city does not bring about the annual regeneration of life but it does spawn Fyfe-like orchids in rows and rows of nursery flasks and Luton's plaster dwarves, leprechauns, flamingoes, bear cubs and bambies. Also, there are Norny D.'s artificial flowers which proliferate in the windows of city florists, in supermarkets, Econo marts and funeral parlours. And out of the Carnival comes Old Kacky to teach children a mechanical kind of art that effects the barren illusion of reality and excludes the vital and bizarre accidents of "reality". The Carnival even gives birth to ambassadors that carry the curse of Fyfe-Luton- Kacky to Paradise itself, where they try to shape and mold the people there in the grotesque image of the people of Carnival City.

Apparently those who escape are few indeed. However, there are the temporary escapes offered by the whisky and television in the Weesackashack room, well named after the coyote who circles "hungry

on his own trail, to discover scabs from his own rear end" (13).

Here people, dull with the pain of the Carnival's huis clos, gulp whisky and watch reflections of themselves on the television screen. Nevertheless, there are the few, like Carlyle, who rebel at the barrenness of the city and manage to get off the sinister merry-go-round and to escape to Paradise.

The carnival metaphor not only controls the portrayal of the city but also seems to shape the narrative movement of the novel, for Carlyle's quest takes him on a path which both circles and spirals. His route is charted by the circling fertility dance and merry-go-round and by the spiral which signifies the carnival's suspension of the customary order. Although Carlyle has managed to effect a limited sort of escape from the city, where both his wife and child died, he spends his time repeatedly circling back to rescue the people of Paradise from the City Jail or the bus depot or from the rodeo's "bright bubbles of balloons ... and the up and down music of the merry-go-round" (195). These are the circles which form the backdrop for the main action of the novel in which Carlyle spirals deeper and deeper back into his past in order that he might see the faces of those who initiated him into the Carnival in the first place. This downward spiral is paralleled by a second one, his descent into the diabolic and labyrinthine streets of Carnival City where he searches for Victoria, who for him is "the whole thing", hidden somewhere at the mysterious centre of the maze.

Carlyle begins both of his descents in "Book One" of the

The Vanishing Point. In his initial burst of springtime euphoria, he experiences an involuntary and minor recall of Aunt Pearl and little Willis's blue balloon. It passes quickly and Carlyle moves buoyantly toward Carnival City where he soon discovers that Victoria is lost and he begins his search for her. As though anticipating the conclusion of his quest, he first looks for her in Paradise and then extends his search with a circular and futile trip back to Beulah. Instead of finding Victoria there, he finds a cold damp mist that mutes the world but nags him awake and fills him "with strange lightness, his mind walking just along the edge of consciousness" (110). Apparently Carlyle learns that what he seeks is not to be found in a retreat to some prior place or position of preconsciousness. He is committed to a fully conscious descent into his own past and into Carnival City. Thus "Book One" establishes the pattern of circular movements and spiralling descents that dominates the entire novel.

"Book Two" loops the reader back eight years and allows him to follow Carlyle's trail through Paradise up to the moment when Saunders confronts him with the possibility that he may have pointed Victoria the wrong way. In those eight years Carlyle's memories of his past surface, calling him back to reckon with them. His first encounter with Saunders summons Aunt Pearl and Willis and white stools and magic lanterns, and Carlyle wonders: "How come Aunt Pearl had floated up ...?" (133). The Christmas ceremonies in the dance tent evoke the blind pain of more recent events that have not as yet assumed the clarity of memories:

He saw Magdalene Powderface tip her face back and away from her baby's hand like a moth at her mouth and cheek. He felt his throat stiff He waited for the emotion to subside.

"I came to live with you last summer"

"Because I lost my wife."

"And I lost my baby daughter."

"Before she could be born!"

(168)

The moments of recall in "Book Two" are more complete or more intense than those in "Book One" and suggest Carlyle's slow downward spiral into his past.

"Book Three" circles back to Carlyle's search for Victoria - begun in "Book One". In Carnival City there are the hellish "days and evenings of wandering and aching with confused helplessness! It was all he could do - visit and revisit the Indian Friendship Centre, the bus depot, bars and restaurants - searching among the destroyed, the homeless young, the limbo dwellers" (262). As Carlyle spirals through Carnival City, moving inexorably toward its lowest level in the Carnival tent, he also journeys deeper and deeper into his past. And so he conjures up kaleidoscope memories of Aunt Pearl, with her chicken wattle cheeks and intransitive sighs, anal fixations and mania for order; of little Willis's toy room on the third floor; and of the carnival barker Christ in the stained glass window of Knox church. He remembers Old Kacky and the day that he banished Carlyle into the vanishing point of his office and Mate who also disappeared into the oblivion of another vanishing point.

But it proves more difficult for Carlyle to summon up his father: "Two searches now; he'd found Aunt Pearl again - indeed had never lost her - or Old Kacky. How about his father? Why should he be able to recall the curtained pallor of Aunt Pearl's face but not his own father's features?" (324). Somehow it is easier for him to recall Sadie Rossdance and her three little cottages on the other side of the fair grounds where Carlyle's father's car was so often parked. Finally it is the memory of a childhood hymn that defines the father-son relationship: "you in your small corner and I in mine" (336).

When Carlyle's descent into his past is complete, he awakes in the Foothills Carleton Hotel knowing himself to be a night creature, the child of Aunt Pearl, Old Kacky and a faceless father.

Why had he never thought of himself as a night creature. He might once have been - not now. The darkness was not merciful - sleep, yes - but not darkness without sleep - darkness that would not forgive the light - that was without mercy. This was the darkness he could remember from his prairie childhood, when the whole house hummed and thrummed with the winter wind dirging at the brass weather stripping.

(338)

At last Carlyle learns the answer to two of his mythic questions, for he now knows, in part, where he has come from and also that he is bound to leave the darkness of Carnival City once and for all. However, he does not begin to spiral upward toward that he has been taught to deny until he searches for Victoria in the revival tent,

in the depths of Carnival City hell. But Victoria is not in the depths of hell and Carlyle does not find her until he begins his ascent toward Paradise. When he does see her, his vision is still dark and distorting, and he still bears the mark of Aunt Pearl and Old Kacky. Therefore he offends Victoria by presuming to order her life. However, both Carlyle and Victoria circle back to Paradise in their separate ways, in time to participate in a carnival of Paradise which is truly a suspension of the accustomed order. It is in the dance tent that Carlyle learns the magnificence of Matthew Bear, who can give himself to the rhythms of the drum that throbs like the one that pulsed for Carlyle and Mate in the idyllic past and drums like the ruffed grouse, his own pulse and the master thrumming of the wind in Storm and Misty Canyon. It is Victoria who shows Carlyle that he may get where he is bound by allowing the drum to release him from all that Aunt Pearl and Old Kacky have taught him. None the less, as Carlyle enters into the dance, he does not relinquish his consciousness and so it is with full knowledge that he participates in a dance of life that is also a dance macabre incorporating licence, cold, starvation, disease and death:

Who cared now - who cared for tabes and
 for little sabre - shinned babies in
 the deep trachoma dark! Who cared now
 if the belly sang high - if the belly
 rumbled low. Canvas and rags and card-
 board kept you almost warm in twenty-
 five below. Let the fevered baby cough
 and the night sweats come If
 casual blanket marriage bring luetic
 babies, raise blisters for ourselves and
 for our sisters, in the Bull Durham sack

we just let it run and run and run! ...
 So we lash the hidden instinct wolf to
 life - we club the mirror ... we smash
 it with disdain!

(384)

In the dance tent, Carlyle consciously gives himself to the benign and demonic rhythms of the awesome mother and in this manner achieves a harmony with nature and her children. It is only when Carlyle assumes this new innocence that he can see Victoria clearly and knows that she also is in a state of innocent harmony for, like the earth itself, she is pregnant with life. It is only then that Carlyle is free to know that he loves her and to become her lover. Their union is swift to bear fruit, for it is the next day that Carlyle awakens to find that his discovery of innocence and love has given him the power to perceive a paradise "happier far". The power, apparently, is the power of the imagination which allows him to comprehend and mirror all that is around him so that it becomes "more nearly true" and to perceive life where there was none before. And as Carlyle turns his mirror upon a world which to him had so recently seemed dead, it bursts into life. He hears the spring surf, the music of Beulah's renaissance, and sees the river willows suddenly, miraculously, in full leaf. On that spring morning, even Archie's long dormant truck explodes and explodes and explodes again into life and circles the school grounds in a scene that is gloriously and absurdly alive.

The victorious note which sounds at the conclusion of

The Vanishing Point would seem to celebrate, not only the birth of Carlyle Sinclair's imaginative faculties, but also the fact that he has dealt with his sterile and demonic world. He has managed to escape the regime of Aunt Pearl and Old Kacky by defying their barren lessons and participating in the more vital and comprehensive rhythms of Paradise. In doing so he has effected a tentative marriage between the twin societies, which is manifested in his union with Victoria. Predictably, the reconciliation of the children of Jacob and Esau is a fruitful one. It rescues Carlyle from artistic oblivion and it enables him to bring the knowledge of the doctor, the agriculturalist and the community planner to Paradise, perhaps rescuing the people of Paradise from oblivion. Carlyle has also learned to move with the demonic currents of life, at least in the dance tent. Similarly, he has learned to celebrate the vital absurdity of life as it is manifested in Archie's trucking triumph. Nevertheless, the victories are tentative ones. Even as Carlyle celebrates his quickened powers, he makes obeisance to Aunt Pearl, Fyfe, Old Kacky and Ottawa; "Tell you what, Aunt Pearl and Fyfe and Old Kacky and Ottawa - I'll marry her, - I promise, I'll ask her" ... " (388).

Perhaps the tentative note of celebration with which this novel concludes also speaks for Mitchell, for he, like Carlyle, seems to have found the comprehensive perspective of a mythopoeic writer. He too stands in an intimate relationship to the object of his creation as his identification with Carlyle suggests. He views the essential and recurrent nature of Carlyle's experience and, at the

same time, gives coherence to the specifics of the Twentieth Century scene. From his vantage point, he is able to envision Carlyle moving along the prescribed path of a mythopoeic hero until, in a tentative way, he redeems what is valuable, finds what he seeks and experiences a home-coming.

Such a comprehensive and affirmative vision is surely satisfying in itself. Perhaps there is additional satisfaction to be found in the fact that The Vanishing Point embodies and fulfils much of the potential that is evident in Mitchell's earlier fiction. The realism of Who has seen the wind is more than matched by the subtlety and relentless realism with which Carlyle and his world are portrayed. This time, the task is more difficult for the narrator must trace the workings of an adult mind, including its memories of childhood. Furthermore, although Carlyle's society is essentially like Brian's, it is portrayed in larger and more complex terms. The little garrison town of Who has seen the wind that was last seen "dim - gray and low upon the horizon ... not real, swathed in bodiless mist"³ is developed into the complex Carnival City which Carlyle comes to know so well. In Who has seen the wind, imagination shapes and colours many of the separate moments of the novel; however, the imaginative powers at work in The Vanishing Point are such that they not only lend colour to commonplace events, but also give coherence

³W.O. Mitchell, Who has seen the wind (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), p. 294.

to diversity through the use of a controlling and synthesizing metaphor. Whereas much of Who has seen the wind may have been patterned after "Intimations of Immortality", The Vanishing Point appears to be an independent and creative transposing of an essential human story into contemporary terms. It would also seem that the period of wandering in the realms of idylls, Menippean satire and romances is comprehended in the mythopoeic vision. The harmony that characterizes the idyll is echoed in the creator-protagonist identity and in the coherence created through the use of the synthesizing metaphor. The abrasiveness of satire is evident in the portrayal of white society as a diabolic carnival. The contours of the romantic quest seem to shape the protagonist's journey, although Carlyle's final triumph is necessarily a tentative one. It appears, then, that the mythopoeic perspective is one which allows Mitchell to incorporate valuable aspects of earlier perspectives.

The mythopoeic perspective is not only comprehensive. It is also affirmative in that it seems to make it possible to envision a protagonist who comes to terms with a world which is very much like the one that bewilders Brian O'Connell. Both of their worlds are divided ones. Brian finds himself in a garrison town which militates against the vital prairie people. Carlyle's society is even more clearly polarized. However, although the existing link between Paradise and Carnival City is no more than an insubstantial footbridge, Carlyle effects a partial reconciliation between the children of Esau and Jacob. In both of the novels, the official societies are

satanic and sterile. In Who has seen the wind, Sean knows that the garrison gardens are necessarily barren ones; Ruth discovers how the society torments its victims; and The Bens, Brian and Digby learn that it can be a prison house. This garrison prison is, more or less, buried for twenty-six years beneath the Arcadian creations of Crocus and Shelby, but it finally emerges, in The Vanishing Point, in its full blown, barren form of the diabolic Carnival City, which freezes its victims into grotesque statues and manipulates them into fruitless suffering or into the limbo of consumer cycles. The Carnival's satanic power extends even to Paradise, and its agents, from the oil company, violate the prairie itself. Carlyle learns that one cannot transform such a monstrous society, but he manages a partial escape to Paradise. There he learns to deal with the apparently demonic and absurd aspects of life which earlier had confounded him, as they do Brian. These aspects cannot be evaded; nor can they be transformed. It would appear that they must be embraced and even celebrated. When Carlyle finally does so he achieves a kind of harmony denied to Brian who came, with his memories of a perfect antecedent home, to look upon the earth as his "homely nurse".

The home-coming which Carlyle experiences would appear to mark a tentative end to the long and difficult journey which begins in Who has seen the wind, with the assumption that man, exiled from his antecedent home, must languish in a postlapsarian world. Apparently, Arcadian fantasies are only a temporary escape from the fallen world which demands that it be encountered. However, the

encounter is a difficult one, even in The Kite's relatively idyllic town of Shelby. In The Vanishing Point, the protagonist is required to descend into hell itself; but this proves to be the preliminary part of the process by which he gains an artist's imagination. With his new perspective, he sees that the earth is his home and his paradise.

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