

AN EXPLORATION OF THE IDEA
OF IDENTITY
IN SASKATCHEWAN ART

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When I was a child growing up in Alberta, the question of our identity as Canadians or the possibility of pride in that identity, simply never came up. If it had, I suppose that we would have been merely bewildered by it. For weren't we more or less just like our big neighbour to the south, only with borders and another government?

In school, we were taught the history of the thirteen colonies along with that of Upper and Lower Canada. We learned the stories of American Presidents before we heard those of Canadian Prime Ministers. We had a better idea of what the capitals, cities and accents of individual states were than of our own provinces.

During vacations, we drove to Banff, then British Columbia, then Idaho and Washington, and finally to California, in ascending order of desirability, as we began to have more time, and over years, more money to spend on those vacations. Relatives who had been able to retire to "the States" were considered enviably better off than those who had had to stay in Canada.

I even remember planning a 4th of July party when I was nine years old, which was to be held on July 1st, since as far as I knew the only difference between the holidays was their dates. The idea for the party was taken from a book about parties with American holiday themes, which I had borrowed from the public library. The public library had no

books on Canadian holidays for me to get ideas from.

We liked "the States". They were bigger, more populated, and, by their own definition, better. We concurred wholeheartedly.

Yet we knew we lived on the Canadian prairies, in the province of Alberta. What did that mean?

Mainly, it meant that we felt vaguely embarrassed about being so far from everything "important". It was a commonplace that styles in fashion would appear in New York, six months later show up in Toronto, and six months after that finally arrive in Edmonton. If we looked within our country for definition at all, we looked to Toronto, which was at least big, if still a little backward by American standards. Vancouver was alright, but reputed to be so English. Montreal we didn't think about at all -- it was French, and therefore in another country. But Toronto had people who were rich, no farmers, and probably no Ukrainians. It comforted us to think that we had one city that Americans might have thought not-the-boondocks, if they had known it was there.

As far as living on the Prairies went -- they were out there, and what could one do about it? The one thing we knew for sure was that we may have been a prairie province, but we certainly weren't like Saskatchewan. There they had even more farmers, and we had turned all their rats back at the

borders.

In fact, Saskatchewan at that time probably had a clearer idea of what it was than Alberta did, for we were like members of the British middle class with pretensions to the upper -- we thought that if we changed our accents we might be able to pass, whereas the political and social history of Saskatchewan might have given it a stronger sense of itself. (Now it begins to seem that the Conservative government in Regina, with the same kind of middle-class pretensions we had in Alberta, looks to the United States for the money and status it wishes it had, much as we did when I was a child.)

By the time I got to art school in the late sixties, thought had changed a little. Canada had adopted its own flag in 1965, courtesy of Lester Pearson, and not without some difficulty.¹ The printed media were beginning to publish a few small notes on the subject of Canadian nationalism. (Some examples: "Learning to Be a Canadian," by Mitchell Sharp;² "On Canadian Identity"³ by J.J. Deutsch, "The Canadian Identity," by Anthony Westell,⁴ "Watching the Sun Quietly Set on Canada," by Donald Creighton⁵).

By then, at least, it was accepted that "Is there a Canadian identity?" was a valid question to ask.

It was also being understood in some quarters that in

order for a sense of Canadian-ness to grow and flourish we were going to have to sever ourselves from the Americanization of Canadian culture. Furthermore, it was seen that the separation would need to be done by law if it couldn't be done by agreement.

In art the raising of the national consciousness was progressing, against all odds, as well. The artists' lobby group known as CAR (Canadian Artists Representation, now CARFAC) had been formed in London in 1968. Greg Curnoe, Jack Chambers, Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland, all Ontario artists, were involved in high-profile movements to call attention to the extent of American involvement in Canadian culture, and to replace this involvement with an art based on Canadian experience. In 1971 the National Gallery mounted an exhibition of Joyce Wieland's work called True Patriot Love.

As Charlotte Townsend-Gault points out in Visions, Wieland felt that the cure for Canada's identity crisis was to concentrate on those aspects of the country that are peculiarly its own: its northerness, its winter and its multicultural culture.⁶ This exhibition allowed her to bring together her own rendition of these attributes.

Wieland said of her own work in this period, "It is not so much a vision of Canada, it's making things about what we have in common in Canada."⁷

Another Ontarian, John Boyle, was also working from his

own background, and using the history of Canadian art as source material. A major work by him, "Midnight Oil: Ode to Tom Thomson" (1969), shows Boyle's regard for his hero and the Hero's relevance to art.

However, back home on the prairies, things had progressed somewhat differently. In 1955, the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop had been formed. It had been created as a workshop for practising artists, with the intention of inviting major talents to Saskatchewan to act as catalysts for the work of artists there. (With the exception of Jack Shadbolt and Joe Plaskett, invited as leaders in the first two years, until 1970 Canadian artists were not considered the kind of catalysts needed by the participants.)

In 1962 New York art critic and famous espouser of colour-field painting Clement Greenberg was invited to act as Workshop leader. At the same time he was asked by Canadian Art magazine to make a tour of the three prairie provinces and describe what he found there.⁸

His visit, and the resulting article, have been both important and controversial ever since. Ronald Bloore, a former member of the Regina Five and still a major figure on the Canadian art scene, has described Clement Greenberg as "the disaster that hit Canadian art twice." He says that strong artists resist the superimposition of style and ideology in order to develop their own style.⁹

Conversely, Terry Fenton, Director of the Edmonton Art Gallery and notable Canadian Greenberg disciple, wrote in the National Gallery of Canada's Bulletin in 1976 that, "Above all, Greenberg's workshop at Emma Lake ushered in a new era in Saskatchewan painting . . . Its most decisive and permanent result was the establishment of a powerful group of painters in Saskatoon."¹⁰

Whatever the qualitative judgements, no one denies the impact of the American critic's theories on painting in Saskatchewan, and through Terry Fenton, in Edmonton.

But for me, a young art student at the University of Alberta, the art world was not entirely American. It was also English. By 1968, only one of four professors hired in Canada was a Canadian citizen.¹¹ In my art school, American and English professors brought their standards and ideologies with them, and once again, the question of our identity as Canadians or the possibility of pride in that identity did not have very much importance.

By the early seventies, however, we were beginning to shift a little uncomfortably under the imported ideologies, and to feel a need to draw on our own backgrounds and experiences as source material for our art. I remember, from about 1971, a small sculpture by Alberta artist Walter May, then a student, called "Get a piece of that big blue Alberta sky under your belt." It was a landscape in the round --or

square actually, as it was in the form of a cube, eight or nine inches on a side -- with land and sky equally divided, and a tooled leather cowboy belt with a big silver buckle holding the whole thing together at its "waistline". It was the first piece of representational, humourous, obviously prairie-identified sculpture I had ever seen.

In 1972, Philip Fry, then curator of Contemporary Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, wrote the following in his introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition Temptations of Aquarius: Paintings of Robert Ralph Carmichael: "The choice we have to make is between an abstract, theoretical universality and . . . a new civilization that respects the regional differences that are proper to various societies."¹² Also in 1972 a group of Edmonton artists prepared an exhibition entitled For an Independent Hairy Hill. It centered on the theme of the disappearance of the small farms and small towns -- of the rural West that formed our history. The intention of the exhibition was to underline the validity of regional experience as inspiration. (In 1973/74 it toured Canada under the auspices of the National Gallery.)

And in the University of Alberta Department of Art and Design, students and some faculty were going so far as to suggest that a change away from the British and American-dominated structures, and therefore emphasis, was long past

due. To be sure, the signs of rebellion were small. But nonetheless they left one with the hopeful feeling that a change was in the works.

In 1983 I returned to art school, this time as a student in the M.A. program in Studio Art at the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Art and Art History. I had been painting, in a great deal of isolation, in small towns and small cities, for several years. I strongly needed contact with other artists, with artists' ideas, with the sense of Art as Life that I felt so lacking in my own experience.

I had heard of Saskatoon as the "ultimate artists community". I thought it must be a place where support for an artist struggling to make pictorial sense out of what she knew and felt would be beautifully easy to come by.

Instead, I found a city where there was a definite aesthetic -- the same one established by Clement Greenberg in 1962 -- and artists who wanted to find a place in the art mainstream were definitely better off if they worked to fit themselves into that aesthetic. In fact, I found so little effort to encourage artists to do anything else, that a graduate student who had been in the province for two years could honestly not have heard of an artist of the stature of Regina's (or Craven's) Vic Cicansky. I found an art school where instructors said, "It's not that I think you should be

painting abstractly , but . . ." meaning that they thought exactly that. I found, for me, alienation, confusion and a temporary but devastating loss of my own grounding in what I know, for myself, to be important.¹³

What I did not find was an art establishment in any way concerned with the question of whether it should be trying to give to the larger community, through art, a way to make sense of this place and an understanding of what it means to be from and to have lived a life in it.

Yet I know that there is another prairie art, the art of fictional writing, in which just such a question has been the basis of a body of genuinely important work. This question has arguably also been the basis of the recognizable identity of the form.

It is my intention in this paper to examine the idea of identity in prairie art, in comparison to that of prairie fiction, with emphasis on the art and fiction of Saskatchewan.

It is also my hope that through this exploration I will find some idea of where the future of identity in Saskatchewan art might lie.

"IDENTITY"

Comparisons of visual art to literature are not often made in this period of the history of the arts. This situation may have its source in the movement by artists away from the subject in painting which took place in the middle of the century.

As well, influential American art critic Clement Greenberg made several statements in the 1940's and 1950's which essentially forbade any artist with aspirations to modernity to look to literature for inspiration, or to interpret art on any but material and structural terms. Religious, metaphysical or philosophical interpretations became no longer permissible.

In "Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," (1947) Greenberg outlined this critical overview.¹⁴

In "The Situation at the Moment" (1948) Greenberg proposed that the American artist "embrace and content himself . . . with isolation . . . to give the most honesty, seriousness and ambition to his work. Isolation is . . . the national condition of high art in America."¹⁵

In "A Symposium . . ." (1949) Greenberg expressed the idea that "the naturalistic art of our time is unredeemable as it requires only taste to discover." Further, he included all forms of realism, including Surrealism, Futurism, Neo-Romanticism, Magic Realism, etc., in this condemnation, calling them "pretexts, all of them literary or journalistic,

to reintroduce what is essentially academic naturalism."¹⁶

Nicholas Calas, in "The Enterprise of Criticism," published in Art in the Age of Risk, sums up Greenburg's philosophy as "art cannot achieve independence by pointing beyond itself to the spirit."¹⁷

All this notwithstanding, it seems not unreasonable to say that the states of mind which produce literature are similar to those which produce visual art. The writer, having experienced, attempts to synthesize experience into a form, in this case verbal, which can in turn be experienced by the reader. The visual artist's need of expression is very like the writer's, but the form is visual and the audience is a viewer.

I believe that this is the case whether the visual artist is using individual perception of life's events, or perception of colour, form, texture and balance, as source material.

With that as a premise, it seems reasonable to believe also that it is valid to compare the history of art with the history of literature, and to compare that which the history has produced, as well.

My secondary interest is in an examination of the question of identity in Canadian prairie fiction, but only as a standard of comparison to my primary concerns: What is the state of the identity of contemporary Canadian prairie art,

especially as represented by the art of Saskatchewan? What are the reasons for this? What are some possible directions for the future?

When we refer to identity, we usually mean a distinct set of personality characteristics that are either obvious or discoverable. These characteristics develop over a lifetime through a combination of factors, including the effect of background or history, influence by others and personal synthesis. Because one is always part of a society, and having the identity which maturity brings means accepting one's part in that society, individuality alone does not constitute identity. At the same time, one cannot adopt equally all the ideas in society and still retain an identity. Therefore the idea of identity also includes the concept of attempting to sort out one's own reactions and standards from those around one.

Dictionary definitions of identity use such phrases as "the unity and persistence of personality"¹⁸ and "being oneself or itself and not another."¹⁹ In 1971 Robert Fulford quoted A.S.P. Woodhouse on the necessity to "frankly speak forth one's findings in one's own idiom."²⁰ For my purposes identity will be defined as a state of being true to oneself while retaining characteristics in common with others; of trying honestly to build on and gain information from one's own experiences; of using this structure along with one's personal values to set standards rather than accepting standards holus bolus from others. In other words, identity, integrity and a sense of community are all part of the same package.

The major tradition in Saskatchewan art, and indeed in prairie art as a whole, is the landscape tradition. Landscape has been, and remains, one of the forms which is most descriptive of the concerns of Saskatchewan artists. To Visions, Terrence Heath, now Director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, contributed an essay called "A Sense of Place."²² In this essay he reminds the reader of Northrop Frye's statement that the organizing principle of Canadian art has been not "Who am I?" but "Where is here?" Heath states that despite growing internationalism and sophistication, the "here" of the question has remained tied to a sense of place.

Interestingly, in an article 13 pages long, not including reproductions, and despite the strong personality of landscape art in Saskatchewan, Heath refers to only three Saskatchewan artists.

I think that the reason for this can be found in a statement he makes about Dorothy Knowles: "Her landscapes are readily identifiable, but they do not evoke place. They are quite deliberately worked over in an open, wash and drawing technique which tends to bring the background to a visual level with the foreground. The painting rather than the depiction is of primary concern, even though the subject matter would suggest a more traditional landscape approach. The treatment of landscape is far less abstract than one sees

in the works of Gordon Smith or Gershon Iskowitz, but the references are just as secondary to the method of painting. Knowles' paintings thereby become not depictions of place at all. Instead, her art contains an internal, almost circular reference system of its own. Seen from the perspective of the landscape tradition, her work reminds us that certain types of abstraction may in fact contain more of a sense of place than faithful rendering does. The search for the basic forms of landscape, no matter how geometric their delineation, and a concern with the primary colours of natural phenomena, may present more visual information about a place than the spatially undifferentiated surface detail and tonal patterns, however representational, of paintings such as Knowles."²¹

This statement could in fact be applied to the work of many Saskatchewan landscape artists whose concern is as much with the tenets of modernism as with their subject. "Where is here?" has been exchanged for "Here is the surface." Some artists working in this way include Knowles, David Alexander, Greg Hardy, Reta Cowley, Wynona Mulcaster.

Of course many Saskatchewan artists are enthusiastic about literal depictions of the world around them, and even those mentioned above work more literally from time to time. However because of the enthusiasm of the mid-twentieth century for colour, form and surface, rather than for

representation, this literal approach tends not to be as critically acclaimed as a more abstraction-oriented one would be.

Looked at in this manner, much of Saskatchewan landscape art can be seen as a close cousin to the other mainstream Saskatchewan art form, the legacy of the New York School of the 1950's.

Abstraction as a way of life in this province was brought to its full flower in 1962, when Clement Greenberg was invited to lead the Artists' Workshop at Emma Lake. Previously, well-known artists Will Barnet and Barnett Newman brought some of the power of personality with them, when they led their workshops in 1957 and 1959 respectively, but it took Greenberg's two-week visit to the camp, and his subsequent (in)famous article in Canadian Art,²⁴ to give the American movement such a strong start here that colour-field painting remains the mainstream art form 20 years later.

I will return to the history of Clement's Greenberg's influence in Saskatchewan later. Right now it may be sufficient to say that Saskatoon is still considered by Greenberg and his followers to be the second most important art centre (for post-painterly abstraction) in the world, after New York. A catalogue of the province's abstractionists who have made their mark on and influenced art and

artists, not only in Saskatchewan but also in the rest of the country, would at the least include painters William Perehudoff, Robert Christie, Otto Rogers, Art McKay and Ted Godwin, and sculptor Doug Bentham.

Modernist Saskatchewan landscape painting and Saskatchewan abstract painting share characteristics in common which should be looked at more closely in order to further this study of identity in the province's art. Both are concerned with "the integrity of the picture plane," and with the importance of size and format. Both take colour as a defining element in their vocabularies. Neither is strongly identified with the artist's experience outside the painting (that is, other than the immediate experience of the act of painting), except where it provides the initial response to form. Clement Greenberg and his disciple agree that both are important, "non-provincial" modes of painting, in fact to be the only ones that are so.

The third major approach to art in Saskatchewan is one which has not been given the stamp of approval as regards long-lasting validity by the Greenberg group. The original participants in this third category have been to some extent influenced by Californian David Gilhooly, at least in so far as he brought to Saskatchewan a sense of humour, a world created in his imagination but based on the real one, and a sense that clay -- and by extension other humble ordinary

media -- could be not only a craft medium but also a medium for making art. The art in this category tends to take as its mandate a vision of art as more-or-less everyday reality, to be presented with humour, intelligence and concern. Its practitioners, artists in both two- and three-dimensional materials, include Joe Fafard, Russ Yuristy, Vic Cicansky and David Thauberger. Again, the influence of the ideas is stronger than this short list of artists might indicate, and other younger artists have followed their example.

If it seems that I have avoided giving this third approach a short, easily remembered descriptive title, that is indeed the case. While the approach used by artists in this category may be similar, it does not lend itself to simplistic description. In Modern Painting in Canada Terry Fenton presents some possibilities (for a title) when he devotes a chapter to "Regionalism, Populism and Anti-Americanism."²⁵ However since he gives all three terms the status of sub-categories of nationalism, I prefer not to adopt any of them as descriptors until I can take a closer look at the concept of regionalism later in this paper.

Folk art is another strong Saskatchewan art form. In a 1979 issue of artscanada devoted to prairie folk art, the editors offered the following definition: "The folk artist demonstrates conviction about himself, the creative agent of his life and his art. Folk art is the expression of one's

life, not specifically of one's "culture." It is not specialized and it makes use of what is at hand, of personal stories and history or of plants and animals that are nearby. It remains within the stream of events, it responds with directness to the offerings and circumstances of life . . . Folk art makes a home out of existence."²⁶

Folk art is strongly represented in Saskatchewan. The same cultural climate that has produced hundreds of other painters, particularly but not exclusively landscape artists, both male and female and from all age groups and financial classes, has also given folk artists the sense that a visual description of their lives has validity and meaning. Some of the well-known folk artists in the province include Wesley and Eva Dennis, Ann Harbuz, Fred Moulding, Molly Lenhardt, W.C. McCargar and Jeanne Thomarar.

Folk art and my third category have characteristics in common which give them the same cousinly relationship that modernist landscape and abstraction have. Both folk art and "the third category" take inspiration from daily life. Both are concerned with content which creates form, rather than the other way around, and use colour as a descriptive element rather than as a form of itself. Neither is concerned with whether each is the better group of artists. Both are aware of the possibilities of inventing and reinventing a world which can be more real than the found one.

My final category of Saskatchewan art can be described as flower painting. This group, including Donna Kriekle, Sharlene Dee Stauffer, Louise Walters and Don McVeigh, also use subjects other than plants, but tend to return to their decorative, frontal, beautifully coloured flower and/or still life pieces for renewed inspiration and resource material. Like the third category and folk art, this is a world of realism, concerned with accuracy of depiction. However it is an internal, interior world, less interested in the artist's relationship to individuals and events than it is to his/her vision and imagination.

These five rather arbitrary selections do not describe all of the art being created in Saskatchewan. However they do cover a significant-enough part of it so that by examining their commonly held characteristics we can begin to discover whether art in Saskatchewan has "the unity and persistence of personality."

At this point, I would like to pause and consider the question "Why identity?" Why be concerned with a particularly Saskatchewanian identity in art? Is art not supposed to be an international language, addressing international matters and understandable by everyone? Does not directing one's attention to an identity felt in a small area of an underpopulated country indicate a rather narrowly provincial approach?

This is certainly the stand taken by internationalists in art, who lean towards abstraction, post-painterly abstraction and modernism as the vocabulary of an international language. Questions of content -- whether fear of nuclear annihilation, starvation on a world-wide scale, and poverty for two-thirds of the earth's population; or life with one's family, making a living, and forming loving friendships -- tend not to be addressed by internationalists, no matter how important they may be to the people of most nations. Internationalist art tends to be about art.

It is periodically suggested, and quickly refuted by internationalist critics and writers, that art is an "international language" when it is American and abstract, but when it is not it is English, German, regionalist, provincial, or whatever. An example of a particularly defensive reaction is found in Karen Wilkin's article "The Prairies: A Limited View." "It seems fashionable lately to accuse Canadian abstract artists of catering to New York taste, ignoring the fact that an increasing degree of abstraction is characteristic of the development of 20th century art. Why abstraction should be labelled as New York and suspect, while work deriving patently from California funk should be acclaimed as grassroots regionalism, remains a mystery to me²⁷ Other examples are seen in the chapters "New Internationalism" and "Western Canada and the

Emma Lake Workshops" in Terry Fenton's Modern Painting in Canada.²⁸

Terry Fenton, as mentioned previously, is a notable disciple of Clement Greenberg and Director of the Edmonton Art Gallery, which is a very powerful gallery in Western Canada. In 1974 he wrote and published in Artnews an article titled "High Culture in Prairie Canada." In it he divided art into that which was "regional" or "provincial" and that which was High Culture (or international). "Provincialism, in its pejorative sense," he wrote, "refers to the supposedly pathetic attempts of artists to keep up with the center, and to their fate, which is to inevitably miss the point." He described a "regional" style as an attempt by provincial reaction to justify itself; as the proclamation of an art with "its roots in the soil" stemming from and satisfying the needs of the people, and always divorced from the art of the center. "This attitude," he said, "is based upon something deeper than misunderstanding, something that more closely approaches a deliberate falsehood. To be 'of the soil' the regional artist must deny being influenced by major, current, center-produced art . . . The fear of access to the outside world, more than the fear of foreign cultural imperialism, prompts regionalist jingoism. Whatever the reason, the regionalist adopts a style (invariably an imported one) that is easily distinguished from the style of the center."²⁹

In the same article Fenton wrote, "That Saskatchewan artists wasted no energy worrying over their provincial position accounts for the fine painting they produced during the 1960's. . .The aspirations of young painters in the West were decidedly nonregional, and they turned to New York for inspiration rather than to Toronto or Montreal. . .It seems to me that the strength of Western Canadian art stems from its openly provincial relationship to the mainstream of modernist art and its ensuing avoidance of regionalism."³⁰

To Terry Fenton, Western Canadian artists of strength were those he could define by the relationship of their art to the art of Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, Adolph Gottlieb and Kenneth Noland.

On the other hand, George Melnyk, who writes regularly about Canadian culture and politics, has written in an article of 1981 that "In Western Canada those who are seeking to be original in their art are those who are trying to create an indigenous form. The extent to which they are able to generate such a form is the extent to which they can be called original."³¹

Melnyk states that Western Canadian culture has been weak, imitative, influenced, secondary -- because its "dominant formative or stylistic element has come from somewhere else." He ascribes this situation to the cultural and political forces which built the West: "Western society was built on a conscious effort to eradicate native culture. This colonial mentality bred a sense of imitativeness, and subservience to an imperial centre which has characterized the West for the past century."³²

In this article Melnyk also writes, "Without a style of its own a people cannot exist as a distinct identity. Their identity is fuzzy . . . A whole people's consciousness of itself is repressed (therefore inauthentic) when its identity is determined elsewhere, when it comes from without rather than from within."³³

Poet and essayist Eli Mandel has written about the plight of the writer whose knowledge of writing is based on language imported from other times and places, while a life, a culture, a history is being created around and inside him without his knowledge. Mandel calls this "the gap between literature and life."³⁴

This is what Mandel grew up hearing:

"And those that were good shall be happy
 they shall sit in a golden chair;
 They shall splash at a ten-league canvas
 with brushes of comet's hair;
 They shall find real saints to draw from--
 Magdalene, Peter and Paul;
 They shall work for an age at a sitting
 and never be tired at all."

And "Music was a thing of the soul -- a rose lipped shell
 that murmured of the eternal sea -- a strange bird singing
 the songs of another shore." And "Life is but a Thought,"
 and "The nation that has schools has the future." Meanwhile,
 outside the books was another reality. "At the rim of the
 Souris Valley, a ramshackle green clapboard house rattles and
 creaks in the unceasing wind, . . . in those years always
 gritty with dust, the topsoil lifting, blowing away. My
 father is in Meadow Lake, or some other god-forsaken town,
 trying to sell, of all things, Fuller Brushes. We have no
 money. The house groans . . . The coalminers of Bienfait
 were gathering to march on the town of Estevan. Steel-
 helmeted RCMP posted machine guns at what they called
 strategic corners and streets. Jewish farmers like my
 grandfather abandoned the hopeless dry dying farms . . .
 Outside the green clapboard house, another Russian thistle
 bounded by . . . Somebody carves murdered by the RCMP on the
 grave of a dead miner."35

As Mandel says, "I wasn't even aware that the informa-
 tion I was gaining from literature and from books on
 geography and history had not the slightest relevance to the

geography, history, or life of the place where I lived or that living in Estevan I didn't even know I lived there. The life of the mind and the life of the body had been radically separated, compartmentalized. Mentally, I was being brought up as a genteel Victorian boy, with a quaint though serious touch of middle-European Yiddish gentility to boot. Physically, emotionally, like Stegner and in his words, I was a sensuous little savage."³⁶

And yet, raising the question of regional identity in art is an activity that makes a lot of art educators and critics, and more than a few artists, very edgy.

However, this "fear of regionalism" cannot be said to be an important obstacle in the creation of another major prairie art form: fiction. It is a given now, among most writers and critics in Canada, if not always among educators, that there is a prairie fiction, something that is distinctly "itself and not another." As George Melnyk says in his essay "Radical Regionalism," "the literature of the West . . . has spoken clearly of the importance of the interaction of the human need and natural dimensions in the creation of this region's culture."³⁷

A major book-length study of the themes of prairie fiction was published by Laurence Ricou in 1973. The title of his book, Vertical Man, Horizontal World, has become something of a catch-phrase in itself. Ricou postulated

that the dominant theme in Prairie fiction was man's relationship to the vast, demanding landscape around him. "What is noteworthy about Canadian prairie fiction is that the imagination so often starts with the same basic need to explore these questions. The landscape, and man's relationship to it, is the concrete situation with which the prairie artist initiates his re-creation of the human experience. Even those writers who do not use this image explicitly can be seen to be utilizing it tangentially."³⁶ He also wrote, "The myth of the land is imaginatively valid, by virtue of its being shared, often almost intuitively, by a people trying to express their sense of themselves in time and space."³⁹

In 1977 Dick Harrison published Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction, a study of the growth of fiction in the West. His book builds on Ricou's theme of man and land, and adds to it an awareness of the influence of culture on man's reaction to the landscape. As he says in his preface, "Canadian prairie fiction is about a basically European society spreading itself across a very un-European landscape. It is rooted in that first settlement process in which the pioneer faced two main obstacles: the new land and the old culture. The land was a challenge, not only physically but psychologically; like all unsettled territory it had no human associations, no ghosts, none of

the significance imagination gives to the expressionless face of the earth after men have lived and died there. The prairie, in effect, lacked the fictions which make a place entirely real."⁴⁰ His study, he writes, "traces the growth of prairie fiction over the last century as part of our imperfect and often self-defeating efforts to humanize that country."⁴¹

In three critical essays on Western fiction which Eli Mandel published in 1977, he too discusses the identity of the prairie writer as reflected in his/ her work.⁴² He argues that distinctive regional prairie literature creates a mythicized world, one which does not simply describe our surroundings but by exaggeration, enlargement, fantasization, makes a reality even more lifelike than the one we know. He finds the unifying theme and images in the minds of the writers themselves, who project onto the land "its image of redemptive powers in the figure of a child, and its image of demonic powers in a hostile figure or tyrant who is the land."⁴³

Mandel also quotes, and seems to agree with, Robert Kroetsch, who has said, "In a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real."⁴⁴

What all these writers have in common, other than their agreement that in one fashion or another the land is the

formative element in Western fictional identity, is the assumption that there is a Western fictional identity, and what's more, that it is worth talking about.

How did this happen? How did it come to be taken for granted that prairie writers have the right, even responsibility to describe in their work this sense of what being a prairie person means?

It certainly was not always the case. Early writers about the Canadian prairie were European explorers, visitors and settlers who responded to the new land with European expectations and studied it through European eyes.

Henry Kelsey wrote in his diary for August 20, 1691: "To day we pitcht to ye outtermost Edge of ye woods this plain affords Nothing but short Round sticky grass and Buffillo."⁴⁵ Later writers tried to make use of the romantic forms of the 18th century: "All these champaign beauties reflected and doubled as it were, by the waters of the river; the melodious and varied song of a thousand birds, perched on the tree-tops; the refreshing breath of the zephyrs; the serenity of the sky; the purity and salubrity of the air; all, in a word, pours contentment and joy into the soul of the enchanted spectator."⁴⁶

It is questionable whether one could legitimately describe the Regina wind as "the refreshing breath of the zephyrs" but this author and others tried.

Another response was to remember their own more intimate landscape and be simply overwhelmed by the new: "Here, for day after day, the traveller moves like a speck on the surface of an unbroken and apparently interminable level expanse. Nothing intervenes between him and the horizon, and let him gallop as fast as he will the horizon appears ever the same and at the same distance from him. All the while, too, he sees no living thing on the earth or in the air. Silence as of the grave reigns supreme from morning to night. The spirits of the most buoyant traveller sink as he rides deeper and deeper into this terrible silence, unless he has learned to communicate with the Eternal."⁴⁷

Not until the early 20th century did some writers begin to perceive their experience of life on the prairie as an important resource to interpret and reinvent. However even these novelists, like Ralph Connor, Nellie McClung, Robert Stead and Arthur Stringer, as popular as they were, were Ontario-born. As such, they were representative of a colonial culture which saw the West as a potential extension of its existing structure.

Thus Robert Stead fostered the romantic image of the prairie as a garden of Eden, a kingdom awaiting only its human rulers. To Ralph Connor the West was an empire to be recreated in the fashion of the one just left behind, only with different scenery, as romantic as Stead's. Nellie

McClung loved the prairie landscape, but did not seem to think it had any particular impact upon her characters, except where it gave them an opportunity to try to invoke the values of the more "civilized" Eastern part of the country. Arthur Stringer's prairie was a thing of nearly female beauty, tempting his characters away from the Eastern virtues of culture and family and reducing them to helplessness in their new setting, unless events let them respond as they did to the old.

During the rest of the first half of this century, novelists continued to publish a wide variety of stories set in the West. It is widely felt though that the first truly prairie novel was As For Me and My House by Sinclair Ross. It was published in 1941, 250 years after Henry Kelsey saw "Nothing but short Round sticky grass and Buffillo."

To Laurence Ricou, Sinclair Ross was the first writer to "significantly internalize"⁴⁸ the prairie. He points out that in Ross's description of character he incorporates features and descriptive terms which apply equally to the prairie landscape, or as he says, "Ross is the first writer in Canada to show a profound awareness of the metaphorical properties in the prairie landscape."⁴⁹

To Dick Harrison As For Me and My House is "the central expression of the prairie experience, because Ross's narrator, Mrs. Bentley, expresses so well the reactive

defensive function of the imagination confronting the prairie . . . she isolates the purest threat of the unknown country . . . the empty spaces intimating chaos and unmeaning."⁵⁰

In 1947 W.O. Mitchell published Who Has Seen the Wind, probably still the best-known Canadian prairie novel today. Mitchell's prairie is as much the protagonist as are his human characters, and the town created by people, "part of our imperfect and often self-defeating efforts to humanize that country," takes on the personality and life of its citizens, becoming an antagonist as "mean, petty and bigoted" as one could hope to find.⁵¹

But Mitchell's human heroes have been forced by their environment to become a little larger than they might be otherwise, almost as if in reponse to such dramatic surroundings. Their feelings are questioning, difficult, sometimes uncontrollable. They have a great need to come to terms with that which is around them. Even their fictions -- their mythologies, their lies -- are an enormous response to the enormity of their physical situation.

Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, and his Jake and the Kid stories, heard across the country for years on CBC radio (some of them collected in book form in 1961), brought the prairie as creator of identity to the people of the region. But it took the second generation of writers born here to bring this identity to other writers.

Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe, among others, all wrote at least their first works in the 1960's. This was a time when to give vent to the need to express one's own responses to living on the prairies was still to run the risk of being labelled, as W.O. Mitchell had been, and in his own words, "that folksy old fart."⁵² It was also a time when it was much easier to dismiss popular prairie works of fiction as "regional" or "provincial", simply because there were fewer of them.

Today's generation of Saskatchewan writers -- Geoffrey Ursell, Guy Vanderhaeghe, Lois Simmie, Gertrude Story, Ken Mitchell and others -- will give credit to this earlier generation of writers for helping to create a climate in which it was no longer slightly shameful to write from a regional identity. Yet a writer like Geoff Ursell, active as a novelist, playwright and editor, and also well-educated academically, will underline that the support for this climate came from the writers and readers, not from the educators.⁵³

It would not be surprising that a country with a colonialized tradition, such as Canada, would produce educational institutions which would tend to foster that tradition. It would also not be surprising that in a region such as Western Canada universities would emphasize "the Great Tradition" of English literature, rather than try to

create a new one.

In fact, this has historically been the case. Although there are many sections of the available courses in Canadian literature at the University of Saskatchewan, and although most students majoring in English feel the need to take at least one course, there are in fact only two courses in Canadian literature on the Calendar. One course in Western Canadian literature is listed. A student may graduate with a three-year B.A., majoring in English, and have taken no courses in Canadian literature. A student taking an Honours degree in North American literature may, by studying British, Commonwealth and American literature, avoid contact with Western Canadian literature altogether.

A quick survey of the Calendars of the other Western Canadian universities reveals that their requirements of students majoring in English range from one course to none at all. None of these other universities makes a course in Western Canadian literature available, although at the University of Regina and the University of Calgary a student may take a special topic or special study in the subject.

And as Geoff Ursell has pointed out, the existing courses are the result of the work of individuals within departments, and of students themselves expressing their need to study their own literature.⁵⁴ It seems that for those who structure the education of young people on the prairies, Canadian literature is of minor importance and Western

Canadian literature barely exists. It seems that "the gap between literature and life" is as wide as ever. Even if there is more Canadian content in the literature courses than seems evident, the fact that this is not reflected in the universities' Calendars indicates the lack of encouragement from the literary/academic establishment.

Despite all this, Saskatchewan writers have been able to write from, and paradoxically to create, a prairie consciousness. To do this they have found it necessary to form their own publishing companies, such as Thistledown Press, Coteau Books, and Thunder Creek Co-op, in order that their work may be read. The widespread and quite powerful self-help and lobby group, the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, was built out of a need for a supportive agency within the Saskatchewan writers' community, since support was not available from the existing organizations.

This approach to taking responsibility for one's own destiny --probably also a prairie characteristic --has resulted in a state of affairs in which hardly anyone could legitimately disagree that there is a prairie fiction, and that it does speak from a truly Prairie sensibility.

Reading today's Saskatchewan writing can tell us something of what it means to be from this place. It is about a kind of character, a kind of history, a kind of landscape and the effect of that landscape on character and

history. It has "the unity and persistence of personality". And identity, integrity and a sense of community are part of what we learn.

Would we be able to say the same about today's Saskatchewan art? As I have read, written and thought about this question, two or three possible parts of an answer have begun to emerge. The first is that one cannot escape the fact of Clement Greenberg's profound effect on the way in which Saskatchewan art has established itself in the past 20 years.

Writing in "The Green and White," Keith Bell points out the importance of the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in the history of art in the province,⁵⁵ as does Terry Fenton in numerous magazine articles and in Modern Painting in Canada.⁵⁶ So did Gary Michael Dault, in "The Alternate Eden," published in Visions.⁵⁷ (Dault, referring to the idea that "the prairie makes mystics of us all" also says, "Younger prairie painters have tended to keep their eyes focused more on the immanence of New York than on the omnipresence of heaven.")⁵⁸ In an article called "Saskatoon" published in Canadian Art, Robert Enright wrote, "To understand how modernism established its grip -- some would say strangle-hold -- on the collective imagination of Saskatoon's artists, one has only to study the history of the Emma Lake Workshop."⁵⁹

As all these writers, and many artists, critics and teachers have found, the name of Emma Lake is nearly synonymous with that of Clement Greenberg. In Penelope Glasser's words, "Emma Lake has a secure place in Canadian cultural mythology . . . [it is] known to out-of-province Canadians primarily as the place where Clement Greenberg introduced the aesthetic principles of colour-field abstraction, with widespread and controversial results."⁶⁰ Or as Toronto art critic John Bentley Mays wrote in an essay entitled "Times Change at Emma Lake": "It's only a name, I thought as I drove along . . . But how often the name of Emma Lake comes up when you're reading about the art of this country, or talking with the artists who've made it . . . and one more name, the biggest of all: Clement Greenberg . . . As every critic and artist in North America must know, Greenberg isn't an art critic anymore, he's a church."⁶¹

In less florid prose, Liz Wylie says more or less the same thing: "In the development of contemporary Canadian art, Greenberg is known for visits in which he encouraged artists to take the same path as the Americans he judged to be important . . . In Western Canada [modernism] gained a toe-hold and then spread by way of a subsequent and very specific chain of historical events, which included further visits by Greenberg. The first event in this history was the establishment of the Emma Lake workshops. In its first two years

of operation Emma Lake had Canadian artists leading the sessions . . . From then on, however, American or British artists of modernist persuasion have invariably dominated the workshops . . . Included among these artists have been Michael Steiner, the New York sculptor who led the Emma Lake workshop in 1969, and Anthony Caro, who led the 1971 session. Taken together, they have had an important influence on the development of modernist sculpture on the Canadian prairies."⁶²

As Wylie had already pointed out in her article, "Two of the sculptors Greenberg became excited about were American David Smith (1906-65) and Anthony Caro, an Englishman born in 1924."⁶³

Michael Steiner was invited to lead the 1969 workshop on the recommendation of Terry Fenton.

Even those Saskatchewan artists who have resisted the power of Greenberg's aesthetics and influence have found it necessary to resist, not simply to ignore.

In 1981, Joe Fafard exhibited a series of unflattering, but modernist, sculptural portraits of Clement Greenberg, as a sort of final comment on his philosophies. Previously, Fafard had been quoted as saying, "First the artist makes the object then the critic makes the box to put it in. Not the other way around, which is how New York got into trouble."⁶⁴ He has also said, "Abstract art turns people

off. It's for the in-group. Abstract art is so hung up on form it totally excludes content. Form takes care of itself if a thing is worked at from an emotional point of view. Feeling takes care of form if you're concerned with content."⁶⁵ (It may be taken as an indication of the strength of modernism's hold - "modernism" itself a word whose current use was coined by Clement Greenberg - on Saskatchewan art that an artist like Joe Fafard would feel the need to defend his use of another aesthetic.)

David Thauberger, an artist who has identified his work strongly with the characteristics of folk art, was quoted by John Bentley Mays in "A hard-eyed look beyond landscape": "The whole idea behind colour-field abstraction is that we must perceive ourselves as a backwater. But the most significant art is done where one comes from - local is not the right word, but art must be based on where you are. You cannot pretend you are from New York. . . But colour-field abstraction is no longer the issue it was for me. I did feel it necessary to react against it, which I once did - but no more."⁶⁶ In 1980 Mays had also written about Thauberger, "who, like a prairie fundamentalist, like to talk about his enemies as red-tailed devils and his art as a holy war. He's got in mind the faculty at Regina and the abstract painters up at Emma Lake - just for starters - when he recalls his intention 'to tread very blatantly on the canons of the

modernist school, that flatness, colour-field work and conservative taste.'"67

But for many Saskatchewan artists, including abstractionists and modernist landscape painters, Greenberg's influence is seen to be a very positive one. Moreover, because modernist-influenced art has become and remained the mainstream in Saskatchewan, despite major changes in the rest of the art world, it has become the standard by which new art is judged. Unfortunately, in my view, it has also become the "sure" way to make art which is likely to give the artist ready acceptance and a marketplace.

Saskatchewan seems to be the only place left where what the art establishment thinks is "modern art" is the same as what the entirely untrained non-observer on the street thinks.

The second major part of an answer that I can see is related to the fact that identity in prairie writing is closely related to a specific experience of prairie life. As Geoff Ursell says, "All of the strongest writing is grounded in specific experience. . .you deny that at great peril to yourself as an artist."68

"Specific experience", not necessarily a determinedly regional interpretation of that experience is, I believe, the unifying force behind the work of the artists in my third category of Saskatchewan art, described earlier in this paper.

Joe Fafard works with the lives and personalities of people he sees around him every day. Vic Cicansky and Russ Yuristy use as sources the ordinary material of their own lives, like gardens, fishing and stories told about both. David Thauberger remembers in his painting the places and people he grew up with.

All these artists, and others, also use as source material a world which they experience through modern-day media. Television, radio, magazines and newspapers are almost a necessary part of life to those who love the prairies but choose not to feel isolated because of it.

In fact, one wonders if the much vaunted concept of "isolation" in Saskatchewan has any validity today at all. It could be argued that Saskatchewan residents are as immediately related to the world as are residents of anywhere. Despite the uncomfortable feeling, which some people appear to have, that we do the best we can with limited resources, I do not believe that our access to the arts and to life is necessarily any more second-hand than that of artists anywhere.

As Joan Murray pointed out in her review of the exhibition "The Figure" there is an entire generation of Canadian artists "whose minds have developed under the blue glow of the TV screen and whose sensibilities have been sharpened by the ironies of video art."⁶⁹ In other

words, interpreting the world around one in the context of its coverage by the media is not necessarily restricted to so-called "isolated" Saskatchewan. As well, the "need" to experience life through TV may not be the definition of isolation.

However the perception of Saskatchewan as an isolated outpost was one factor in the development of modernism in Saskatchewan and continues to be a reason for the existence of modernism as establishment art. Robert Enright quotes artists and critics in his article on Saskatoon, on the subject of isolation. Douglas Bentham is quoted as saying that "Because Saskatchewan is relatively isolated and quiet, you can get things done, you can work here;" Peter Millard, "Because we are isolated, we have to make our own culture ourselves or we won't have one;" Jonathon Forrest, "The isolation one feels in Saskatchewan is really its blessing. We are not inundated by style changes or trends the way eastern cities are."⁷⁰

Bruce Ferguson brings another point of view to the subject: "There is a cultural tension in regionalism - that is, isolationism or protectionism is designed to foster regional cultural differences - but if this isolationism becomes institutionalized over time, there is a danger that it will become conservative, even reactionary."⁷¹ Robert Enright underscores this point of view in his summing-up on

the topic: "It is not surprising that the artists working in Saskatoon in the '50's and early '60's quickly recognized and embraced modernism's potential for interpreting flat, undifferentiated prairie space. But what began as a resistance to the sense of isolation in the prairies and a feeling of alienation from the art establishment in the east has created a new isolation, one that is no less limiting than the parochial attitudes attacked by the visiting modernists several decades ago."⁷²

It is my belief that Ferguson's statement misses the point somewhat however: not by any stretch of the imagination can I manage to bring Saskatchewan modernism in under the banner of regionalism.

George Melnyk records the definition of regionalism in two ways. The first is that which restricts the region to being a part of and therefore less than the state. In this definition regionalism carries negative connotations of parochialism and provincialism, but is also a "proto-nationalism evolving to a higher form, that is, a full nationalism." It is part of, in the West, "those political ideologies that seek an accommodation with American imperialism and identify Canadian nationalism as a prime threat to the region."⁷³

Melnik also records a definition of regionalism which he calls "radical regionalism". In this definition regionalism

is non-nationalist, is tied to the historic and geographic relationship of man with nature; arises from a common tradition of politics, culture and society; has the goal of autonomy, not independence; and shares with nationalism its fight with American imperialism but recognizes that a colonialist interpretation of the region is as much a threat to its goals as is American neo-colonialism to Canadian nationalism.⁷⁴

Both definitions imply that regionalism comes about through an awareness of the region's special characteristics, which turns into a desire to foster those characteristics, that specialness. A desire to foster the special characteristics of the prairies is not one that I associate with modernism.

It is true that isolation was a factor in the development of Saskatchewan's modernist mainstream, but it is also true that isolation was seen as the major evil which prairie artists needed to struggle against, and that this idea created the perceived need for a relationship with New York.

As I have noted, today's Saskatchewan artist has the same relationship with the world that Ontario's artist does, or Nova Scotia's, or southern England's, or Rio de Janeiro's. And only if one feels that art world events (exhibitions, exhibition openings and after-opening parties?) which take

place in New York galleries have more intrinsic importance than world events which take place everywhere television cameras, newspaper reporters and magazine photographers go, can Saskatchewan be perceived as isolated from the rest of the real world.

Of course modernism does believe exactly that. As Liz Wylie writes, "Modernists purged artistic expression of any extraneous elements; art was about its own processes and its own materials."⁷⁵ In particular (for this paper) modernism believes that the artist does not need to interpret a regional experience for his or her art to have validity. If art is truly the international language that modernism describes, then a regional experience will be less valid rather than more.

There is a common perception of internationalism, nationalism and regionalism as opposing philosophies, of which the artist in Canada must choose one. In this perception, regionalism is probably viewed as interchangeable with isolationism, nationalism with centralism and internationalism with modernism. In a region then, the choice comes to be between modernism and isolationism.

However, as we have seen not all Saskatchewan artists who choose to interpret specific experience do so under a banner of wheat fields with grain elevators rampant. Obviously, personal experience and its interpretation, even

in this province, will vary as broadly as gender, age or degree of urbanization and as specifically as each minute of each day will allow. Reasonably obviously, there are also common factors in the geography and history of Saskatchewan which, whether we are more or less immediately aware of them, affect us all, including climate, space, an agriculturally-based economy, a large native population, fairly recent settlement, conflict between rural and urban development.

Of course there are artists for whom the effect of these factors is a major visual resource. Looking at their work, we begin to develop an understanding of what a life lived here is all about. Realism or abstraction is not the issue. Specific experience and a common historical and geographic filter of that experience is.

As Geoff Ursell describes it, in this province we have in our art history the importance of Clement Greenberg and Emma Lake. Against that, we have "people who have asserted the importance of their location and the things they know about."⁷⁶

In my view it is unfortunate that it is these artists who have become a sub-stratum of Saskatchewan culture, rather than the culture itself: one finds individual works and individual artists, but one does not find a movement. And as we have seen in the experience of Saskatchewan writers, it takes a movement to validate the idea of working from a

collective identity, or at the least, to record the existence of that identity. With the writers, it took people "working to create something, rather than to change something."⁷⁷

In addition, it took people working separately from the University of English Departments to set up the alternate structure necessary. In the visual arts, the artists and the art departments are very closely connected. At the University of Saskatchewan, there is one course on the calendar on the history of Canadian art. In fact, this course is only offered by visiting lecturers, usually in Extra Sessions, and not every year then. This course normally covers Canada's art history until World War II. No study of contemporary Western Canadian art is available, except possibly by a student's individual effort.

In Saskatchewan, as long as modernism is the official culture, artists and critics will support it or react against it, but not act to create something else. Until the concept of identity in art is up for discussion, until specific experience as influenced by regional experience is seen to be an important creative source, until established artists support changes in what is understood to be art from within the province's cultural structure rather than changes imported from elsewhere, Saskatchewan will continue to produce individual artists who work from a Saskatchewan consciousness, but there will be no Saskatchewan-identified

art form.

Again, George Melnyk: "Until a culture can claim to have generated a way of seeing, a sensibility that is distinct, it lacks originality."⁷⁸ Eli Mandel: "All those bad poems that somehow stuck in my mind . . . became the forms and language I would always have to work with . . . and the writers . . . the whole panoply of 19th century versification ranging as it does from the impossibly sublime to the intense inane."⁷⁹

The Saskatchewan modernist mainstream, the art Establishment with its attendant internationalism and impersonality of experience, may or may not turn out in the future to correspond with Mandel's "bad poems" and "19th century versification." What is certain is that the language it speaks is not the only language available to Saskatchewan artists. Because modernism exists, artists have and will continue to have at our disposal a heightened awareness of the importance of form, colour, texture, value, space, the picture plane and the edge; but because the influence of our history, geography and sociology on us as individuals is as great as it is, whether or not we are aware of it, we also have available to us the languages of image, content and theme. These languages may be less immediately accessible, but they, when used in conjunction with more formal means, are the languages which create identity. For the sake of that identity, and the original art which has yet to be originated in this province, we must begin to use them.

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