



Special Collections

John Metcalf

Biocritical Essay

by

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In John Metcalf's second novel, *General Ludd* (1980), the narrator, poet Jim Wells, has become the Writer-in-Residence at St. Xavier's University in Montreal. Parts of the story have some basis in the author's own experiences in such a position at the Universities of New Brunswick and Ottawa, at Loyola and Concordia between 1972 and 1981. Wells, by nature manic depressive, reactionary, and alcoholic, becomes increasingly offended by St. Xavier's mindless adoption of all manners of new instructional technology. He is hostile to the bafflegab of its self-serving promotional jargon, which is largely a brilliant parody of Marshall McLuhan's ruminations on the media. As agents of communication, both St. Xavier's and Wells are ineffective: the institution is indecipherable, the man bitterly frustrated and stymied.

Wells's associates in the Department of English are quacks and grotesques. Metcalf's caricatures are broadly drawn: the characters' habits or hobbyhorses are ludicrous and private. One particular oddball in his bleak ken is Professor Norbert, an "American specialist in Canadian literature", who has been "exhuming" Victorian verse from early newspapers and publishing this "necrolatry" in small collections. "Nothing could impede the invention of a native literary tradition", Jim sourly observes, voicing one of the heartfelt themes of Metcalf's criticism. He continues,

Norbert had given me signed copies. I'd accepted them gratefully. They'd go into storage with all the other rubbish in my friend's garage in Edmonton, with all the manuscript, notebooks, dribbles of failed writing, correspondence--everything that I was banking on some university buying to feed the research mills. Bumph for future generations of dung beetles to roll into balls and trundle busily about--balls from which nothing living would emerge.

Through Jim, Metcalf's own satire is here directed against "the invention of a native literary tradition". (98) The mockery of Canadian literary inflation is clear. It would be clearer in his book of careful prosecution, *What Is A Canadian Literature?* (1988).

In the context of the present inventory of the John Metcalf papers, a deliciously prophetic irony turns upon Jim Wells's assembly of his own archive. (As Metcalf approached The University of Calgary the year after *General Ludd* was published, the irony is compounded further.) The present collection shows, less facetiously, this author's ceaseless practice of his craft, and his single-minded dedication to the Canadian literary community. It is also well to remember that as Metcalf's craft has matured, he has been at one and the same time story-teller, critic, collector of art, African artifacts, and Canadian first editions, anthologizer, lecturer, reader, jazz aficionado, and editor in unequal parts.

It is merely a coincidence that many of Jim Wells's opinions and attitudes, and sometimes even his expressive style, are echoed in John Metcalf's fiction and essays. Metcalf's *iron*, of course, is not himself but a independent invention of language.

There is another slight irony connected with this assembly. Metcalf's essay "Dear Sam" was first delivered at the University of Guelph symposium in honour of his fiftieth birthday (November, 1988), and subsequently published in the first "Critical Directions" volume *Volleys* (1990). He singled out what he considered uncritical and misdirected praise of the work of Rudy Wiebe, following this with several longer quotations from Wiebe's novels *My Lovely Enemy* (1983) and *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970), each of which he held up to general ridicule. The Wiebe archive is also represented in a University of Calgary Special Collection.

In his writing John Metcalf and his personae can use irony with delicacy and wit, with the eyebrow arched, as it were--three of his favorite writers are Ronald Firbank, P.G. Wodehouse, and Evelyn Waugh. However, this perspective can also be enlisted in the front lines of satire, and laid on with politely withering scorn. He has recurrent targets of ridicule, enemies of promise to be held in derision; these include, but are not limited to, the agencies of state-funded culture, particular Canadian writers past and present, an uncritical acceptance of the banal, Canadian culture itself, any denials of life and nature, systems and their functionaries, nationalistic assumptions about Canadian literary history, puffery, provincialism, and the easy doxy of orthodoxy.

Metcalf's criticism is implicitly directed against a lack of perspective and objectivity, against insufficient values of judgement or chauvinist standards, against forms of vulgarity or entropy, against the lack of a Canadian audience. Sometimes his reader may sense a tight grimace of frustration behind his irony, his sincere exposures and revelations. He is an accomplished and articulate opponent, and conducts his unique battle against what he considers to be manifest forms of Canadian literary flabbiness and mindlessness. Several essays in *Freedom from Culture* (1994) speak directly to several of these topics--government-subsidized literary culture, the narrowly academic and nationalist motives behind the Canadian canon, dishonest evaluation.

Often Metcalf's manner is that of the fencer, with a disarming feint followed by a witty thrust, the smiler with the knife. He will surgically excise an attitude, or passage, some banality, some provocative claim, and examine it. His reaction may be waspish; it may be disbelieving, or innocently incredulous. The isolated

material, already naked and made suspect by this very act of attention, may then be broadsided with a spate of wry and opinionated commentary. Sometimes these remarks will begin with calm reasonableness and develop toward acerbic pithiness as the voice of reason gets vexed, and the sheer size of what is being tasked seems irreducible.

The symposium at Guelph also celebrated the publication of Metcalf's *What Is a Canadian Literature?* which, like some of his other criticism, would generate more attack than agreement. The resistance has often taken the form of *ad hominem* sniping at his country of origin, his impertinence, his lack of respect for a received Canadian literary canon. He does not belong to the academy. In the reproofs and replies to his provocations, the appropriateness of Alice Munro's title, "Who Do You Think You Are?", comes to mind. His directness is unstinting; his voice is confident, lonely, and unsparing; his demands for serious evaluation have been unceasing. With especial attention to the short story, he has written against the uncritical acceptance of monuments thought to constitute an order of excellence in Canadian authors and texts. His motive has never been petty; for him, the country's literature should be a vital and estimable measure of its life. As he wrote in his essay "Kicking Against the Pricks",

It is my quaint contention that writing is a moral act. I believe that literature is one of the most important expressions of our imaginative, moral, and national life. The reception and discussion of that literature by readers and critics is therefore of fundamental importance. (197)

There is no irony in the recognition implied by the present archive. It speaks directly to John Metcalf's absolute commitment to writing in Canada, an attention complemented from the outset by his confident foresight about his own literary materials. This collection provides detailed evidence of the considerable infrastructure upon which Metcalf's published work rests. (He is an exacting rewriter, constantly working for nuance, cautious of the purely declarative.) Here are the alternatives and decisions of his artistic practice, and of his close attention to others' practice, in the smithy of fiction. The gatherings of letters to particular writers alone are a rich glimpse into practical craft, a resource.

John Wesley Metcalf was born on 12 November 1938 in Carlisle, Cumberland, England, the second son of a Methodist minister and a former teacher. After his schooling at Bournemouth and Beckenham, he read English and theology at the University of Bristol (1957-1961), took a Certificate in Education, and taught at a secondary modern school and a reformatory in Bristol. He emigrated to Canada in 1962, teaching in several Montreal schools for the Protestant School Board. In 1963 his first story, "Early Morning Rabbits", won a young writers' prize and was read on the CBC; in 1964 eight stories, under the title "The Geography of Time", were published in two successive issues of *Prism International*.

After his father's death he taught in Alberta, married in 1965, and returned to teach in Bristol. By this time in his life he hoped to write full-time. He returned to Canada in 1966, to teach high school in Montreal; the stories "A Process of Time" and "The Happiest Days" were reprinted in the anthology *Modern Canadian Stories* (1966). His eventual career direction was becoming clearer; his literary style was undergoing a rapid process of self-discovery.

The matter of autobiography naturally dogs Metcalf, for many of his narratives appear to emerge from certain

events in his life. He is frank about this. As is true of any artist's work, there are inevitable correspondences between the materials of life and art. He is alert to this form of misunderstanding of the nature of fiction. It justifies his feeling that, in the appreciation and study of literature, technique and language are too often sacrificed to theme and content, or plot. His stories, he would retort, are intensely shaped and imagined particulars which answer only to the demands and devices and dynamics of fiction; they are inventions. He has said of them, "The impulse is often autobiographical--the details not necessarily so at all" ("Communiqué" 22).

Metcalf's characters and their experiences are all too human; they are not obliged to answer to any elements from their creator's life, but speak, rather, of their own particular lives, each in its own self-sufficient world. Metcalf has said, "Many of my stories are a bringing together of passionately remembered physical detail and a re-ordering of the real into a new order which makes a new kind of real" ("Communiqué" 23). A great deal of his literary criticism--a constant and usually tart pleasure--celebrates the artifice of writing, and would teach his readers how to read. But, as he said in the same interview, "Although my primary loyalties are to style, I like the artifice and rhetoric to connect me to a real world, actual or imagined" ("Communiqué" 5).

This archive is an invitation to reconsider some features of John Metcalf's work, especially his fiction. I can only suggest, in an uneven, simplified, and introductory fashion, a few particularities, some of the manners and matters that have developed in his style and subjects. Not all of his stories have the extraordinary literary concentration, the constant signification, of, say, "The Estuary", "The Years in Exile", or "Single Gents Only". On the other hand, few are entirely dismissable. Criticism of his stories agrees on only a few elements: this argues for the inherent variety of Metcalf's fictions. What follows, then, is an introductory and selective look at his performances.

A very few of Metcalf's earliest (or incompletely achieved) stories have never been reprinted or collected, for he remains an exacting critic of his own work. He has dismissed his initial use of the "epiphany story", in which a revelation--an insight, usually of spiritual emptiness--had become a modernist formula, a virtual cliché of closure. (In his essay "Editing the Best", and in a 1992 interview (*Carousel* 8), Metcalf's observations about the form, and about the short story tradition in Canada, are illuminating and persuasive.) If anything, he favours implicit ironic anticlimax, the descent to an unheroic world, in his stories' forms of closure--"endings" is too limiting a term.

Given the relatively rapid maturing of his writing, Metcalf's *Prism* stories are not merely dismissable curiosities. To a considerable extent they are exercises in pathos. A young man, secure in a ritual with his waiter, falls prey to a party of boors in a restaurant; another's life is torn from his aesthetic and social interests by his wife's headache. Remarkably, even in these earliest narratives there are several modest prefigurements of his later practices in fiction, however much this sort of notice might seem to reduce the body of his work to safe and convenient formulae.

"A Process of Time" is the first of Metcalf's stories about teachers; its style does in fact look ahead to the later exact and ironic observation of his personae, as well as to his avenging satire of educational systems. Here comedy and a kind of brutality succeed each other--a dramatic juxtaposition which will come to produce some splendidly grotesque material. Adults with fixations are reductively identified (Peking Man, the Gnome), and the sympathetic instructor spinelessly fails to defend his best but radical student from the principal's demeaning, wrongheaded, verbal assault. Indeed, capitulation to a larger body (physical,

emotional, or systemic) seems to link most of these stories, one only a page long.

The English teacher in "The Happiest Days", dealing with a dull and disinterested class, has a sustaining reverie about a pastoral childhood activity, and wilfully seems to provoke a student bruiser into assaulting him. But this is actually an escapist memory in which the narrator releases his own professional frustrations, and then in fantasy lets himself get beaten, as it were, for that wistful inattention. The story has real merit. Its contrasts of time, action, and mood are compactly handled, and the characters have some level of credibility.

In hindsight, Metcalf's accomplished first story, "Early Morning Rabbits" (reprinted with revisions in *The Lady Who Sold Furniture*), gave some measure of the future. The constantly varying points of view bring the protagonist, David, and his thinking processes vividly into dramatic focus. The seemingly denotative language and incidents in fact all operate with a metaphoric concentration. Thus such elements as a flaring match, a falling pyramid of hens, a black-handled knife, a vividly repellent gut-hooked eel, and a shot rabbit all work gradually toward a unified, accumulative, understated, and increasingly acute effect. The technique, in subtle and exacting refinement, will come to underscore Metcalf's practice in fiction. Here, too, is promise of his precise attention to the textures of the story's world, a deployment of contrast and juxtaposition, the evocative visual details, and the carefully wrought language.

From 1967 to 1969 Metcalf taught high school in Montreal, and at Loyola College from 1969-71. He received the first in a series of Canada Council grants in 1968, co-edited a series of advanced language primers (1968-1970), and five more of his stories were gathered in *New Canadian Writing, 1969*. One of these, "The Estuary", had been awarded the University of Western Ontario's President's Medal for the best story published in Canada in 1968. In 1970 he edited *Sixteen by Twelve: Short Stories by Canadian Writers* where his short list of admired Canadian short story writers assumed a clearer shape. He has written of his principles as anthologist in the essay "Picking Winners" in his collection *Freedom from Culture* (1994).

This was the first of an important series of anthologies on the genre in Canada from Metcalf's editorial or co-editorial hand. *Kaleidoscope: Canadian Stories*, for the secondary school market, appeared in 1972, as did an enduring success, *The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors*, a book which he would later call "missionary work" ("Communiqué" 10). His prescriptive remarks in the last, "Soaping a Meditative Foot", was the first of his distinctive serio-comic critical pieces on the techniques and nature of fiction--and, clearly, on *his* aesthetic practice.

Metcalf's idea of having writers comment on their own work--as they did for his first anthology of Canadian stories, as they do for the recent *Canadian Classics* (1993)--was unique. Like all of their successors, these volumes marked his total commitment to Canadian short fiction, and revealed him as an instructive and detailed commentator on aspects of his own stories. What he said of "Early Morning Rabbits" in the brief author's note for *Kaleidoscope* holds true throughout his career:

It is typical of his work in that it concentrates on sounds, colours, weights and textures. Metcalf rarely tells the reader what to think or feel; he prefers to create a series of pictures or images which lead to an emotional discovery or conclusion. (135)

The stories in *New Canadian Writing, 1969* demonstrate a number of Metcalf's emerging qualities. In particular, his deliberate play with irony as a major tonal and structural device could be better appreciated as a deft, various, and significantly expressive manner--at least one remove from conventionally declarative prose. This perspective is often structurally encoded in fragments of speech or thought, and in one-sentence paragraphs which impose a real sense of timing on the narrative. These are one-liners, as it were, which can also imply a considerable range of feeling, from self-pity to satirical invective.

These stories also show different levels of narrative tone and complexity: the pathos of "Walking Round the City" and the comedy of "Our Mr. Benson" balance each other as relatively straightforward fictions. "The Children Green and Golden", whose title invokes Dylan Thomas's elegaic celebration of his childhood, "Fern Hill", is dramatically richer. The poem is an implicit--and ironic--complement to the narrative: Metcalf's characters run their heedless ways, Time lets them play and be golden in the mercy of his means, and it is the adult world which would take them by their games-playing hands to lead them out of grace. Here the fervent guide out of the pastoral state is one Uncle Michael, whose beach outings subject his innocent charges to biblical indoctrination, and that through the lure of games and a petty reward system. As so often in Metcalf's fiction, the values of life and individuality are threatened by the rigidity of system, unchallenged convention, zealotry, banality, the dour handmaidens of repression and propriety.

"The Estuary" features another recurring Metcalfian type, the man so confident in his own ordering of reality that he is taken to be, and in fact often is, psychotic and paranoid. And yet the character, here named David, is triumphant in his departures from "normality" too, refusing the easy sell-out to all forms of conformity. His keen and alienated intelligence sees the boredoms and banalities of his urban world, its nakednesses, its conditioned behaviour.

David has a higher, sustaining vision--as (again) often in Metcalf, of a Nature unspoiled by human debris. He toys with his psychiatrist, who is tied to a repeating loop of wrong-headed behavioural theory. He lays false trails, pretends confusion and memory loss, and plays the patient game, and resists Dr. Cottle's prescriptive invasion of his secret self. David's longing for the freedom of dolphins in an estuary has been misinterpreted as a suicide attempt; well-meaning hands, a motif of fragmentation throughout the story, return him to the wasteland which he has tried to escape.

The details of the estuary environment and its mammals are Metcalf's especial success: after the psychiatric runaround, David's private memory of it is rich and vital, vividly visual and cinematic. Metcalf renders the scene with an extraordinary pungency and poignancy and sensuousness--a descriptive skill that many critics and reviewers have overlooked. The region is meant to be taken as a symbolic testament of true health--which, for David and John Metcalf, it is, without qualification.

Like "The Estuary", "Robert, Standing" shows how quickly Metcalf's talent had become assured and controlled. Here he presents perhaps his most sympathetic character. The story works the reader through pity and admiration for the lonely, self-sufficient wheelchair-bound protagonist. The details of Robert's heroic struggle to bathe and do for himself are utterly, viscerally convincing; so is his time-out session with two female Mormon enthusiasts possessed of a doctrinaire insensitivity. The story uses such obvious markers as prints from "The Rake's Progress", apt verses from *The Book of Mormon*, and (most cruelly) shoeboxes of filecards for an abandoned thesis in ironic counterpoint to Robert's wasted condition.

Robert must stand firm against or endure the constant challenges of living. His intelligent, teasing responses to these monomaniac missionaries reveal the insufficiency of their rehearsed, rote-driven presentation, and of their inane rhetorical questions. Yet he finally, proudly declares himself a man, against their asexual obtuseness. The story's ironies are subtly integrated into its characters, the apartment environment, and Robert's limited human encounters. The very particular life in "Robert, Standing" is three-dimensional, and only Metcalf's use of metaphorical analogy was not completely and smoothly blended into the fiction.

His first collection, *The Lady Who Sold Furniture*, was published in 1970, the year he achieved Canadian citizenship. From 1971 through 1976 he was impresario and reader in the Montreal Story Teller Fiction Performance Group, along with Hugh Hood, Ray Smith, Clark Blaise, and Ray Fraser. In the early seventies he served as Writer-in-Residence at several universities as noted above, taught at Loyola College, and helped to start up the Writers' Union of Canada (formally inaugurated in 1973). His first novel, *Going Down Slow*, appeared in 1972, the year of *The Narrative Voice*.

The Lady Who Sold Furniture, including "Early Morning Rabbits", featured an interesting mix of voices. "Dandelions", about the low-key day and small pleasures of a faded bookseller, is very nearly sentimental, with a placid pace and scope. In "The Tide Line" an overly protected child on a beach outing confronts the corpse of a seagull beyond the tideline of flotsam. In his panicked flight from this vivid region of wonder and terror he surrenders his new daring and freedom, and the story makes its summary point metaphorically: "With one hand he patted the sand, drawing designs with his fingers and then smoothing them out. And in his other hand, as he watched the orderly progression of the waves, he clutched his fountain pen" (117). The details of the strange and exciting landscape of his adventure are now behind him, erased; a conventional method of inscription will be this sad and conditioned boy's destiny.

In "Pretty Boy" the plagiarized existentialist ideas of a coffee-house *poseur* are punctuated by his budgie's cries. The pretentious character is ridiculed out of his own mouth and through his middle-class situation: "'You've got to see the Self as an obstacle to overcome,' said Eric" (140). The bird's call acts as a stiff measure of the story's unmoored lives. The comedy works through dialogue that is wonderfully elevated and banal; the ironic and witty cross-cutting that results was yet another of Metcalf's evolving and distinctive technical devices.

"Keys and Watercress" is Metcalf's Gothic. Its taut, sustained intensity mirrors its often unpleasantly perverse subject. Its compact style, its liberal use of metaphor and symbol, and the sounds and order of its sentences seem to suggest it went through an extensive process of refinement. Its images and details, beginning with an inadvertently torn-off scab, become increasingly claustrophobic and Freudianly suggestive. The antagonist, a urine-smelling and manically obsessive old man, is mirrored in the fixtures of his dark rooms. The story is constantly unsettling, not only in the man's disconnected and terrifying shifts of focus and mood, but in his instructive, moral, and all but physical assaults on his increasingly nervous young guest.

Everything in the story works cumulatively towards its corrupt and unpleasant revelation. The sickening parody of a polite afternoon tea, the schoolmasterish instruction, always the implied escalating threats, the obviously orgasmic showing of several treasures--everything about the story hints of incipient nastiness. When David's host offers a pitted scar on his leg, his eagerness has become hypnotically irresistible and awful. The story's sense of hovering menace is so carefully managed and released that it would be difficult

not to be affected and moved. David is seen fishing for eels, the old man has a watch called a Hunter, his quarters are dominated by red curtains and a stuffed lion--every detail, bar none, matters in the presentation. Everything is integrated.

The story is pathos raised to horror; Metcalf brilliantly achieves an effect of uneasiness. Though technically "Keys and Watercress" is "literary", almost to a fault, it succeeds as an emotional experience--which Metcalf has often claimed as a first aim of his stories. Most of his later fiction will prove to have the same exacting sense of structure and pattern, of echo and juxtaposition, qualities largely enforced through an unashamed substructure of metaphor and symbol. As he would later summarize his belief in the essay "The Curate's Egg":

'Theme' is implied in every connotation and nuance, in the very rhythm of every sentence, in every pause and silence. It lives in every bright detail. It is sculpted by every punctuation mark. (52)

Theme, he would explain, and it is wise to remember, is embodied in the story's physical world, or "texture" (50).

Here, too, is one of Metcalf's young males who must undergo some formative experience, a culture shock, an information overload. He (or we) must see that his world is reductive, that it denies; it does not permit the self-centered assurance of childhood to continue. Innocence lost, the character may adapt but imperfectly to the new understanding. Nor does Metcalf try to wring any false pity from the situation--after all, sentimentality is simply another of the attitudes which he cannot abide, and delights in skewering.

"The Lady Who Sold Furniture" was Metcalf's first novella. Several set pieces are splendidly vaudevillian, but the story seriously balances a bird-of-passage lifestyle against convention and social order. As Jeanne of the protean surname illicitly sells the contents of the houses she manages--she is no "lady"--her lover Peter, a fledgling teacher, must somehow resist the temptation of her free-spirited negligence. His first professional exposure is to the hyperbolic awfulness of the staff of the Gartree Comprehensive School, and to the inadequacies of its students. By contrast, Jeanne's independence restores his being--and deceives him. In a splendidly realized pastoral interlude the characters' response to nature becomes an extended symbolic indicator of their innate worth. The stream of Time, however, cannot be arrested.

Once Peter has been repelled by the gross physical remainders of an open house party Jeanne has thrown--the ruinous details are unsparing--he opts for the world of duty from which he has been playing truant. Jeanne's ironic parting gift to him of a document case symbolizes his deepest reservations. Green and golden in his own way, Peter must release himself from a destructively heartless fantasy, from his sexual enchantment, from his temporary illusion of family.

While the two chief characters have a distinct and thorough humanity, the blocking figures are largely cartoonish--the comedy comes from people acting like things, or mechanisms. We respond uncritically to the extravagant and comic personalities of Jeanne's partner-in-crime, the removal man Mr. Bill Arkle, and Jim, an ex-R.A.F. twit. Like a number of Metcalf's fictions, however, the story and the characterization darken as they develop.

Even with its tonal mixture, the novella only seems more relaxed than Metcalf's short stories: its details, objects, and memories have figurative resonances. Dialogue that reveals personality occupies a significant proportion of the narrative, and the distinctive characteristics of each voice have been scrupulously worked. Metcalf intercuts speech and narrative, the last from several points of view, to create an unsettled, engaging melange of styles. Both his speakers and prose have an engaging kinetic energy. In one real sense, in "The Lady Who Sold Furniture" form and content have an intriguing figurative interdependency--one of Metcalf's enduring formal concerns.

Going Down Slow drew upon his familiarity with the Montreal school system. His satiric subject and displaced protagonist sometimes produced a plaintive shrillness of tone that would peak in *General Ludd* as a sustained cry of scorn and frustration. Metcalf has admitted,

I think the best parts of it are essentially a series of short stories, which is the reason why I don't think it's a very good novel. ... It was the set pieces of the book . . . that I really enjoyed because they were closest to the short story form. (Cameron 403)

As ever, Metcalf was correct--and undeluded--about his work. The novel *is* a series of tableaux, more often comic than not, each severely boundaried both in time and by physical space. The result, intentional or not, is a sequence of confinements.

It is the system and common sense which threaten the affair between English immigrant David Appleby, a teacher at Merrymount High, and student Susan Haddad. There are valuable elements of spontaneity and honesty in their relationship. But David, almost on principle, mocks many aspects of Canadian culture, largely from his English perspective. His improprieties are not merely sexual, but institutional, and these often petty. In effect, he jumps without a net. He is picked on by his hectoring Vice-Principal, a caricature, and is left behind by the dedicated professional ambitions of his roommate and a colleague.

David is static, self-indulgent, and peevish. His tart tongue is constantly reductive; he sees his Montreal world only in caricature. He is undeniably witty, and he shines when he delivers barrages of absurdity or manic invention. But when he rails against pretension and sham, his reactions are exaggerated and self-dramatizing. In the novel's end, chastened and deserted, his alcoholic illness is a metaphor for his spiritual unhealthiness, immaturity, and rejection of his unlovable profession's demeaning values.

The story "Flowers That Bloom in the Spring" (in *The Teeth of My Father*) is a set piece excerpted from the novel's Chapter Five. In it David must suffer his students' inadequate writing, an insidious confrontation with his Vice-Principal, and a grotesquely sentimental model of poetry instruction from the egregious Head of Merrymount's English Department, Howie Bunceford, a poetaster himself. The entire passage-at-arms epitomizes the ways in which the lock-stepped educational system demands that David's intelligence and his pupils' horizons be limited.

Going Down Slow concludes in repellant excess--in the phrase of Irish writer Flann O'Brien, the extremely graphic scene is "an exegesis of squalor". Before David succumbs to drink and maudlin self-pity at his gross

landlord's, there is one lovely flash of David's (and Metcalf's) best and amusing self. He bemusedly considers his coarse host in his filthy apartment:

Gagnon was so fat that there was no loose in his trouser-leg. His arms were thick and muscled but the skin was pallid. It was the paunch, however, which fascinated David. He observed it covertly. He found himself thinking of 'the paunch' and 'it' rather than of 'Gagnon's paunch' for it seemed somehow independent of Gagnon, an excrescence. It crouched on Gagnon's thighs like a plump animal; like a porridge-filled balloon. Except that 'balloon' was misleading as to size. And 'garbage bag' was possibly exaggerating.

When he stood, the paunch hung like a little barrel. A little firkin. But the key question--was it hard or soft? *Down, Firkin! Good boy!* In French, garbage bags were called 'sacs à ordures.' A delightful word, ordure. (168)

This passage continues into grotesquely amusing reflections on the physics of Gagnon's lovemaking. Here is the essential David, redundant, delighting himself but not moving forward, the naughty boy who cannot let well enough alone.

In this novel the style is rarely expository: the prose is constantly affected. Through their speech alone, the characters can be visualized: Metcalf's resistance of "plonking" stage directions was evident. The dialogue is variously overlapping, fragmentary, interpolative, overheard, imagined, parenthetical. Much of the story is filtered through David's consciousness, in free indirect discourse as he is acting or acted upon, and even in stream-of-consciousness. Forcefully short or fragmentary paragraphs create a bright, sharp, and hard impression. Narrative point of view shifts constantly; the novel's prose, and David's, is singularly mobile, vivid, imagistic, and allusive. It draws attention to itself; it is, in short, a performance.

In 1974, Metcalf received the first in a series of Canada Council Senior Arts Awards. His collection *The Teeth of My Father* was released the next year. Most of his stories were now first accepted by Canadian literary magazines. He remarried in 1975, and in November, while he was Writer-in-Residence at the University of Ottawa, he arranged a conference on the Canadian short story. His unflattering essay "Without an 'E'" tells a great deal about his times in several universities.

Several stories in this next collection soft-pedal the virtuosity obvious in others. "Flowers That Bloom in the Spring" has been noted earlier. "Beryl" is a high and low sexual comedy which becomes a rude joke when the "soft" David--because he likes Nature--cannot satisfy a willing co-worker in her living room. In a splendid touch, his desire is counterpointed by vicars discussing miracles and a gangster film on the television, and subsides at the noise of an upstairs shut-in. "A Thing They Wear" temporarily arrests the freedom and daring of some boys when they confront the mysteries of a used sanitary napkin. And in "The Practice of the Craft" art and life imitate each other in an actor's latest role; touchingly, his professional commitment is all that now counters the downward drift of his offstage life.

In "The Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe" an increasingly drunken MC at an Edinburgh variety show

rouses the audience's latent prejudices against the ironically titled Essen International Amity Boys Brass Band. It is directed by the grotesque puppet Herr Kunst, or "art"; many artful and artless sounds and noises perfuse the story. It has a counterpoint of insult, slapstick, and sexist humour as an incongruous supplement to its mood of greedily accelerating threat. Here as elsewhere Metcalf is powerfully drawn to black comedy in the Monty Pythonesque manner, a tone particularly evident in his novellas.

"The Teeth of My Father" incorporates four of his earlier fictions in whole or in selected passages. As this material is self-referential, and the narrator a writer, the autobiographical confusion of author and persona might become pronounced. This character is associated with story-telling or anecdotes, and "The Teeth of My Father" is itself a containing narrative, a fiction about fiction--Metcalf has called it "a collage" (Struthers 43). It includes an italicized parody of theme-hunting academic criticism for the early story "Biscuits"; the obsessive economies of the narrator's father, a minister, are also presented comically, though without ridicule.

The writer mourns the man in a charged, neatly artificial manner; his sincerity is part of the whole narrative construct. He has already confessed his debt to the theatre of sermons:

I studied my father. He was, unknowingly, teaching me what is now my craft.

Inside my head, I practiced the voice and inflections of his rhetoric,
the rise and fall, the timing of the pause, the silence, the understated
gesture, the rhetorical series of questions and their thundering denial.
(69)

Metcalf teases his readers with a chronicle that seems to shift between art and life. Nevertheless, the persona's father repeatedly handcrafted his own shoes and teeth, never satisfactorily: not only a testimony, this story is also a comprehensive parable.

In "Punctuation As Score" Metcalf has cited a passage from the story "Gentle as Flowers Make the Stones" to illustrate his intricate decisions about paragraphing, italic, suggestion, and punctuation. (In all of his essays, Metcalf's characteristic wit flourishes; here, for example, he makes the stylistic point, "Getting rid of the adverbial mush makes heavier demands on the reader but dialogue should be crisp as a raw carrot and I can't pretend to feel interested in readers equipped with dentures" (103). For all its economical style, this story is rich, perhaps overloaded, with literary and rhetorical figuration, and gives an impression of extreme artifice. Everything contributes to the whole presentation: it is, after all, a narrative about poetry in a literalist world, with irony, metaphor, and rhythm (repetition with variation) its notable techniques.

Here again a creative individual is subject to the simple necessities of existence and to the crass materialist world. Yet Jim Haine tries before all to translate an epigram from Martial about a dead slave girl. On one level "Gentle as Flowers Make the Stones" is filled with female figures, including a Discus fish, his absent daughter, Royal Doulton statuary, and a Jewish ladies' group. Yet it is Jim's ongoing and selfless process with the Latin epigraph which is fascinating, interspersed with his many epigrammatic observations on his urban encounters. The poem, and Jim, achieve literal and figurative climaxes in a car on a symbolic mountain: art proves immeasurably superior to the clichés of life, and more satisfying. The ultimate stanza--by Jim, by John Metcalf--is poignant, tender, and beautiful.

"The Years in Exile" is a wonderfully *realized* fiction, and it has earned particular critical attention. (Others include "Early Morning Rabbits", "Keys and Watercress", "The Estuary", "The Teeth of My Father", the first three novellas, *General Ludd*, and "Single Gents Only".) Rampant with memory, his mind full of pictures, a nameless old writer re-presents his life (and opinions) in Britain and Canada. The discrepancies between his time frames, obligations, activities, and accomplishments are powerful; his sensibilities are splendidly evocative, and movingly rendered. His very existence depends upon such conscious and complementary motifs as pilgrimage, journey, Mecca, collections, holy terror, ritual, papers, words, the remainders that mark his passage. (His confession of inadequacy with narrative structure is, on the evidence, misleading; his very thinking is thick with thematic pattern.)

Fortnell House, near Christchurch, was the boyish goal and treasury which would imprint the rest of his life: history, death, and decay, literal and figurative, were never far from his awareness. In Metcalf's careful prose the deserted building is not only near-numinous for its enraptured discoverer but also convincingly Gothic. The story's English settings are sensuously convincing, and may be symbolically read for broader analogies with the narrator's life there unfolding. An acute visual apprehension illustrates his enduring mantra, "Particular life. Particular life" (98). Every physical detail, ingrained in his very fibre, reverberates both realistically and analogically. Indeed, many of his aesthetic principles confirm those of John Metcalf. The old man's confession of creative bafflement by structure is a red herring, given the thematic persistences of his life.

The guiding intelligence of "The Years in Exile", is richly three-dimensional; the writer, no dotard, sustains himself through a highly textured reverie. His interior voice is not without flashes of irony about the mechanical and hedonistic modern world--but here he is appropriately weary and mature. With his living memories he is in solitary exile where, in an ironic version of the Song of Solomon, "the voice of the vacuum cleaner is heard in the land" (80).

Metcalf moved to Delta, Ontario, and began to increase his important missionary activities. He co-edited *76: New Canadian Stories* and the next volume with Joan Harcourt; the series would continue as *Best Canadian Stories*, with his co-editors Clark Blaise (1978-80) and Leon Rooke (1981). His essay "Editing the Best" tells of his experiences with the genre through these anthologies, and is an important digest of his principles. He and Blaise also co-edited *Here & Now* (1977); in 1978 *Girl in Gingham* collected the estimable novellas "Private Parts" and "Girl in Gingham".

"Private Parts" is comically deceptive; like much of Metcalf's work, it can be at its most artful when seeming to wear a denotative face. Like many of his fictions, it may suggest a theatrical routine--a comedy of manners, perhaps--linked to emphatic elements of cinema. The novella is effectively a parable of identity, as the narrator, the writer T.D. Moore, recreates some primal scenes and virtually archetypal memories from his background which, he believes, continue to deny him full self-realization. Some of the private parts are necessarily sexual: these produce some grotesquely salacious and hilariously self-contained memories. Others, like passages at arms with his narrow-minded mother, are reductive and terrifying, have resulted in Moore's residual and uncomical trauma about his parts and himself.

Still, Moore the artist shapes his confession with deliberately dramatic and rhetorical effects, frequently invoking his reader's assent--and by extension, the reader's confirmation of his worth. "Style betrays

me" (65), he admits at one point, as does structure, in the subdivisions within the novella's two Parts. However, the humour and self-deprecation do not conceal the artist at work, often eager to highlight his tricks. For example, he reproves himself over one scene with his obsessive mother,

(This will not do. The paragraphs flow too evenly, the sequence of statements rounds off the subject too neatly, leading too comfortably to the next asterisk and the beginning of another sequence of anecdote and reflection.) (17)

But such self-consciousness in style, or reflexiveness, is as much about Moore's enduring paranoia, or managing his guilt, as it is about literary formulation.

The novella concludes with as leading a figure as any others Moore has foregrounded: he describes a sextant which he keeps hidden. "I'm not quite sure how it's supposed to work" (84), he confesses leadingly: in its name, its "box" and "clamp screw" it implies his acute sexual preoccupations, while its general function, telescope, and "horizon glass" embody his search for direction. Though "Private Parts" does center on an artist, one of Metcalf's repertory characters, as here his protagonists were becoming more psychologically credible and complex. His skill is comparable to that of the arch Mr. Montague, a monologist Moore recalls from his childhood: ". . . I knew from that moment on that when I was grown up I would be like him, become other people, be applauded, be magical" (21).

"Girl in Gingham" complements "Private Parts": both smack strongly of introversion, relationships are rarely untainted, and bizarre encounters, not unusual in Metcalf's work, are an especial feature. The protagonist is moved from pathos through a vale of laughter into some self-actualization: this has occurred before. Then, merciless, the story drops into a region of grotesque, stunning awfulness almost too suddenly to be called tragedy. Beyond the schemes of his well-meaning friends, what the divorced Peter Thornton wants, he says, is a girl in gingham. By this we infer a kinder simpler time of solid values: as he is a dealer in antiques, the novella argues for tradition.

After a machine connects Peter with a ludicrous sequence of strange and single-minded females, Anna Stevens--vivacious, intelligent, cultured--is the contemporary personification of "gingham". She and Peter are in total accord on society's fakery; they are an obvious match, in Metcalf's witty version of a prospective fairytale romance. But the novella concludes shockingly: serendipitous fate inverts fatally. In a horrible, graphic reversal, Anna rapidly succumbs to anaphylactic shock in the restaurant cloakroom. Metcalf is unsparing: she is attended by a coarse doctor who cherishes a long-standing grudge against anything Italian, and who is a type: the callously efficient, manly "old chap" Englishman. This is a truly bizarre touch in a terrific and excruciating finale that pitilessly gazes at Anna's ghastly, messy, helpless drowning in her fluids.

The final, cruel touch is the new waitress, the last in a series about whom Peter has speculated. But the conclusion, after the coda's protracted and grotesque pathos, is excruciatingly mean:

A voice said something.

"Pardon?"

A waitress stood there with an order pad.

"Are you the party that was at this table before?"

He nodded.

"The other girl she's finished her shift.

She's gone off now."

He stared at her.

She was middle-aged with frizzy, yellowed hair and glasses. She looked tired. Like the other waitresses, she was wearing baggy red pirate trousers and a blouse with puffed sleeves fastened at the breast with black thongs. Round her waist was a wide leather belt with a brass buckle.

Stuck in the belt was a plastic flintlock pistol.

She was wearing the sort of boots that are illustrated in children's stories, *Dick Whittington,*

The Brave Little Tailor, Puss-in-Boots.

"Anything else?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said. "Something nice for dessert?" (154)

This derogatory terminal movement is nearly perverse in its calculation--even on the elementary level of exhausted fantasy. With his usual exquisite care for structure and emotion, however, Metcalf has been careful to build up Peter's unhappy and often guilty existence, and show the superficiality of his world. The catastrophe, which seems radically unfair--nasty, brutish, and short--is not gratuitous, but an ironic summary, and its implications are almost monstrous.

General Ludd was published in 1980, as was *New Worlds*, a selection of stories for a high school curriculum. Metcalf moved to Ottawa, editing *First Impressions* and its successors (1981, 1982), each the work of three young short story writers (several of whose books Metcalf would later guide for the Porcupine's Quill press). In 1982 his *Selected Stories* appeared, as did the ambiguously titled *Kicking Against the Pricks*, largely autobiographical and challenging, important, and impolite literary essays.

General Ludd is unremitting; Jim Wells, a contemporary Luddite, constantly excoriates aspects of his university, Montreal, or Canadian society, and his unsubtle, spiteful, often bludgeoning ironies can become wearing. His sense of proportion in most situations, even tender ones with St. Xavier's Kathy Neilson, is selfish and skewed; Metcalf indulges his attraction to hyperbole of character and expression. This first-person narrator is splenetic, alcoholic, unproductive, lost; he is "going down slow" towards his eventual psychiatric confinement. There are passages of bizarre slapstick in *General Ludd*, not merely verbal, but it is appropriate that finally Kathy must crown the rampaging Jim with a piece of fool's gold. Through Jim, who is not pitiable, Metcalf's satiric targets are broadly drawn and quartered: there is an unusual savagery about this fiction, a bloodletting.

As with *Going Down Slow*, there are successful scenes in this novel which have the feeling of a short story. The triumph is the couple's evening at a bar with a potted Colonel of the old school, the snake-dancer Charmaine (stage name, "Ora Felony"), and her fey black drummer, Harry ("Kingo"). The characters play, alcoholically, to each other, each advancing a peculiar agenda, and in the comedy any Metcalfian literary impositions are minimal. There are also Jim's excruciating encounters with the paraplegic writing student

Itzic Zemeremann, a parodic Jewish grotesque, distorted in body and by post-Holocaust sentimentality. Another of the novel's ridiculous self-serving communicators, he succumbs during Jim's didactic tongue-lashing. One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Itzic without laughing.

Kicking Against the Pricks, eight essays and an extensive interview, is altogether ironic, committed, and crucial. Everywhere Metcalf's care and concern for Canadian writing, and the standards by which it may be intelligently judged, is explicit. He has written about his principles and practice in the author's notes which accompany his anthologized stories (such as "Soaping a Meditative Foot: Notes for a Young Writer" in *The Narrative Voice*, and reprinted in 1993's *How Stories Mean*); here is much more of the writer's intention and execution, the persuasive, almost hermetic severity of his critical stances. Among these essays "Punctuation as Score" and "Editing the Best" are particularly useful, while "Telling Tales", about the Montreal Story Tellers, and an interview with Geoff Hancock reveal the discipline of Metcalf's involvement with the short story genre. Again, his targets for blame or approbation are unmistakable; these essays have a great vivacity, and an unflinching stylishness.

In 1982 Metcalf edited *Making It New*, including his pointed and crisp essay "Building Castles". The collection featured those Canadian short story writers, including himself, whose craft he particularly favoured: Levine, Hood, Gallant, Munro, Blaise, and Rooke. He travelled widely and internationally as reader and lecturer throughout the eighties. Recent stories by established and new writers appeared in two anthologies from New Press (1984, 1985). With David Helwig he arranged the Kingston Conference, "New Canadian Writers/New Canadian Critics", in 1986. There were three co-edited volumes of *The Macmillan Anthology*, creative and critical work (1988, 1989, with Rooke, and 1991, with Kent Thompson), as well as *The Bumper Book* (1986)--"an anthology of contentious essays and squibs about Canadian writing" (*What* 33) and a sequel, *Carry On Bumping* (1988).

In 1986 Metcalf's collection, *Adult Entertainment*, was released, and nominated for the Governor General's award. In 1988 he became the editorial director of the publishing house, Porcupine's Quill, to apply the imprimatur of excellence, "Readied for the press by John Metcalf". He has to date readied some 40 titles for the Press and is quite consciously setting out to publish a whole new generation of story writers. In *What Is A Canadian Literature?* (1988) he prosecuted his concern with the extra-literary and nationalist reception of Canadian fiction--here, an 1896 collection by Duncan Campbell Scott the damning epitome. And in *Writers in Aspice* (1988) he paired stories by Levine, Fraser, Gallant, Hood, himself, Munro, Rooke, and Blaise with specific critical essays, a grand development of the spring 1985 issue of *The Literary Review*, which he had edited.

The title, *Adult Entertainment*, implied Metcalf was now writing for an audience which could appreciate the stagecraft of his fictions. In "The Curate's Egg" he had called rhetorical devices of compression in narrative "new verse forms"(54), his longtime practice. Not unusually, the novella "Polly Ongle" demonstrates a battery of rhetorical and associational devices. Paul Denton, a frustrated romantic, a cultured sourpuss, is astringently ironic about his world, which, like his irresponsible son, does not measure up. His simmering rage implicitly underscores a misjudged dinner and subsequent club-hopping with his uncultured secretary. Metcalf again shows his extraordinary skill with what he has called "*embodiment*" ("The Curate's Egg" 50) through language, detail, paragraphing. One astounding triumph is Denton's protracted and incandescent tirade to his stuporous offspring, a bravura turn of savage disappointment and attack--under the statue of an Argentinian military liberator and hero.

In the equally detailed companion novella, "Travelling Northward", Robert Forde (whose papers are with the University of Calgary) reads from his work to the North Portage Thursday Evening. Everything that surrounds him, and that he encounters, resists art; the story makes great play with country types and a sequence of Forde's antiheroic hardships. And yet, for all the story's ceaseless wry comicality, and its weight of incongruous and unaesthetic conditions, Forde is the real thing, an archetype of the starving artist. He is undeluded, ironic, wholly and impractically dedicated to his craft, when the world sells out in other directions.

Each of his novels earned him critical plaudits in the papers and pedestrian *explications* in subsidized journals and, on average, one thousand, five hundred dollars. He'd calculated once that this worked out to something like four dollars a day. The totally unskilled--positive *mouth-breathers*--received as the basic minimum wage close to four dollars *an hour*.

This thought occurred to him with some bitterness whenever he read pissy articles about the burgeoning of Canadian culture. (193)

We may well hear John Metcalf in the novella's rueful, unceasing and forthright subtext about writing in Canada.

The teacher in "The Eastmill Reception Centre", a reform school, had to cope (almost predictably) with obsessive and crazed personnel, and now lengthily confronts the evasions in his act and style of writing. His play with the illusions of fiction and life are dramatic and ambivalent. But in "The Nipples of Venus" as a stylist Metcalf seems to move away from relatively direct parallelism and metaphor towards a real structural indeterminacy. The fiction works through conventional Roman tourist experiences to two versions of its final incident, one a cryptic last gesture that works curiously backwards.

"Single Gents Only" is as "literary" as anything Metcalf had written: its structural arrangements and inflected details are forthright, and create layers of emotional realities. As David Hendricks, a young, fresh university student has begun to grow away from his pawky origins, he is exposed to a dashing eccentric roommate who is emotionally regressive. Every inelegant object and character contributes to the story's comic coherence. David's eccentric residence, for instance, faces Jubilee Street and the cemetery--a purely metaphoric and "thematic" juxtaposition. For in this comic fiction's masterly artifice, the ceaseless banality of the real world and the deceptions of romance, or innocence, hold court.

In 1991 Metcalf co-founded Ottawa's Magnum Readings and Exhibition Series, linking his longtime interests in art and verbal performance, and published 36 items, numbered and signed, from the readings. In 1992 *The New Story Writers* introduced short stories by nine emergent Canadian talents. His first three novellas were collected as *Shooting the Stars* in 1993, when *Canadian Classics*, stories and commentaries, and *How Stories Mean*, theoretical and practical essays on fiction by Canadian writers (both edited with J.R. (Tim) Struthers), also appeared. His proselytizing impulse remained undaunted, and in 1994 his second collection of essays, *Freedom from Culture*, with several reprinted pieces, was published. Throughout his career, and with an obvious sense of style, John Metcalf has urged and demonstrated the processes of fiction as a worthwhile

study, independent of all theoretical or political agendas. In the beginning was the word, he affirms. Professional literary criticism will continue to elaborate upon his distinctive aptitudes as a creative artist of course. But it may yet be the eloquent testimony of this archive to his generously broadcast gifts as literary commentator, editor, and anthologizer that literary history may especially respect.

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