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Writing Alberta: Building on a Literary Identity

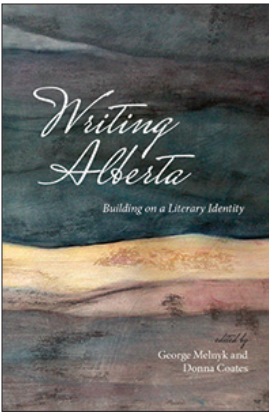
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WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity
Edited by George Melnyk and Donna Coates

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The Mythological and the Real: Sheila Watson's Life and Writing

Joseph Pivato

A Father's Kingdom, a collection of short stories, was the last book that Sheila Watson published (posthumously in 2004). The "father" in the title alludes to Oedipus in the story, "Brother Oedipus," and to the original mythic Oedipus, the King of Thebes. Other figures from the original myth, Daedalus and Antigone, are also referenced in Watson's book, suggesting the closed nature of this kingdom and the power of the king. To a religious reader the title may suggest the Kingdom of God. The title also alludes to Watson's early life growing up in an asylum run by her father, Dr. Doherty. On the first page of the story "Antigone," we read,

My father ruled men who thought they were gods or the instruments of gods or, at the very least, god-afflicted and god-pursued. He ruled Atlas who held up the sky, and Hermes who went on endless messages, and Helen who'd been hatched from an egg, and Pan the gardener. ... (36)

This double meaning of the title and of Watson's childhood experience is an appropriate place to begin an examination of her life and work because it links her real life with the mythological in her writing. The location and nature of Watson's early life in British Columbia had a profound effect on her writing.

She was born Sheila Martin Doherty, the second of four siblings of Mary Ida Martin and Dr. Charles E. Doherty, in 1909 in New Westminster,

BC. Her father was the medical superintendent of the Provincial Mental Hospital in New Westminster. The family lived in an apartment on the grounds of this psychiatric institution and Sheila received her early education there. Her father died prematurely in 1920 and the family moved to a house in New Westminster. Sheila then went to the convent school of the Sisters of St. Anne to continue her education. Her father had left money for her university education which allowed her to complete two years of university at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Vancouver. Sheila earned her B.A. honours in English at the University of British Columbia in 1931, and a teaching certificate in 1932. She began writing at about this time and completed an M.A. in English 1933.

In 1934, in the middle of the Great Depression, Sheila's first teaching job was at St. Louis College in New Westminster. Jobs were hard to find and she considered herself lucky to have a second teaching position in the remote BC interior. From 1935-37, she taught in a one-room school at Dog Creek in the Cariboo region, riding her horse back and forth to school. It was here that Sheila Doherty composed her first novel, *Deep Hollow Creek*, which was only published half a century later, in 1992. This valley also provided the setting for her first short story, "Rough Answer," published in 1938 and the location for her iconic novel, *The Double Hook*, which she completed in Calgary in 1952. (All references to *The Double Hook* are from the 1969 edition.)

When the Dog Creek school closed, she moved to Langley Prairie to teach high school until 1940. Then she moved to Vancouver Island to teach in the town of Duncan where she met the poet Wilfred Watson. They were married in 1941 and she became Sheila Watson. From 1942 to 1945, Sheila taught at Mission City while Wilfred finished his B.A. at the University of British Columbia and then served on a navy minesweeper.

By 1945, the Watsons were in Toronto where Wilfred was a full-time graduate student at the University of Toronto. Sheila took graduate courses part-time and taught at Moulton College. It was at this time that the idea for *The Double Hook* began to emerge in her writing. She explained many years later,

I can remember when I first thought about it, it was right in the middle of Bloor Street—it was in answer to a challenge that you could not write about particular places in Canada:

that what you would end up with was a regional novel of some kind. It was at the time, I suppose, when people were thinking that if you wrote a novel it had to be, in some mysterious way, international. ... And so I thought, I don't see why: how are you international if you're not international? if you're very provincial, very local, and very much part of your milieu. I wanted to do something too about the West, which wasn't a Western. ... ("What I'm Going to Do" 182)

By 1949 the Watsons were back in Vancouver with Sheila teaching as a sessional lecturer at the University of British Columbia and Wilfred teaching with a term appointment. He later moved to Calgary to teach at what was then a satellite campus of the University of Alberta. Sheila joined Wilfred in 1952 and completed the draft manuscript for *The Double Hook*. She had difficulty finding a publisher for such an unusual novel. With a letter of support from Professor Fred Salter of the University of Alberta, Jack McClelland was convinced to publish it in 1959. The reaction to it was at first mixed, but it won the Beta Sigma Phi Canadian Book Award in 1960 and began to establish Sheila Watson's reputation as an original writer. *The Double Hook* later influenced experimental Alberta writers Robert Kroetsch and Aritha van Herk.

In Calgary, Sheila continued to work on her short stories, completing *And the Four Animals*, which was published in 1980 with Coach House Press and in 1984 as part of the *Five Stories* collection. "Brother Oedipus" appeared in *Queen's Quarterly* in 1954. When Wilfred was offered a position in English at the University of Alberta in 1954, they moved to Edmonton. There Sheila helped Wilfred submit his many poems to journals and assisted him to put together a collection. They submitted the manuscript to Faber and Faber in London, where T.S. Eliot was poetry editor. Wilfred's first collection, *Friday's Child*, appeared in 1955 and won the Governor General's award for poetry and the Arts Council of Britain prize.

Paris, France, was the city where the Watsons worked for the year 1955-56. There Sheila went to see an exhibit of paintings by Wyndham Lewis and she developed an interest in his writing and art works. When she returned to Canada, she began research work (1956-61) for her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto with a focus on Lewis. She met Marshall McLuhan who had known Lewis when he was in Canada during the Second

World War. In 1951 McLuhan had published *The Mechanical Bride*, a collection of studies on popular culture that combines visual images and text. McLuhan became her thesis advisor on Lewis since she planned to study both the paintings and the writing of Lewis. In the meantime, Sheila also continued to publish her short stories “The Black Farm: A Modern Allegory,” in *Queen’s Quarterly* (1956), and “Antigone,” in *The Tamarack Review* (1959). When *The Double Hook* was published in 1959, Sheila was still in Toronto. She joined Wilfred in Edmonton in 1961 where she began teaching at the University of Alberta. With the completion of her thesis, she received her Ph.D. in 1965.

The Watsons were back in Toronto in 1968-69 to work with McLuhan in the Centre for Culture and Technology. The result was the book *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970), a collaboration between McLuhan and Wilfred Watson. After the Watsons returned to Edmonton, they co-founded *White Pelican* with Douglas Barbour, John Orrell, Dorothy Livesay, Stephen Scobie, and Norman Yates. This avant-garde literary magazine featured works by many Alberta authors: Rudy Wiebe, E.D. Blodgett, Chris Wiseman, and Henry Kriesel. Sheila mentored aspiring writers in Alberta such as Caterina Edwards, Myrna Kostash, and Miriam Mandel.

In 1975 Sheila Watson retired from teaching at the University of Alberta. *White Pelican* stopped publishing in 1976, but Sheila continued to supervise graduate students and serve on literary juries. Wilfred Watson retired in 1977. Before she moved to Vancouver Island, Sheila Watson wrote a study guide, “How to read *Ulysses*,” for a new course, Modern Consciousness, for Athabasca University’s new English studies program. The editor was Mary Hamilton, one of the last graduate students to have Sheila Watson as a Ph.D. supervisor.

Another avant-garde literary journal, *Open Letter*, brought out a special issue devoted to Watson’s other prose fiction and essays, *Sheila Watson: A Collection*, edited by Frank Davey in 1974-75. The most significant inclusion in this volume was the publication of Watson’s four short stories: “Brother Oedipus,” “The Black Farm,” “Antigone,” and “The Rumble Seat.” Also included were a number of literary essays on Wyndham Lewis, Michael Ondaatje, Gertrude Stein, and Watson’s only statement on the writing of *The Double Hook*, up to that point, “What I’m Going To Do,” which has been quoted numerous times since its appearance. In 1984 the Coach House Press published Watson’s *Five Stories*, which included the

addition of “And the Four Animals.” When in 2004 McClelland & Stewart published Watson’s *A Father’s Kingdom: The Complete Short Fiction*, it opened the collection with “Rough Answer,” which Watson had originally published in 1938.

Soon after Sheila Watson retired, her colleagues at the University of Alberta got together a collection of literary essays in celebration of her literary achievement, *Figures on a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson* (1978). Edited by Diane Bessai and David Jackel, it included essays by many Canadian writers: Michael Ondaatje, Henry Kreisel, E. D. Blodgett, Marshall McLuhan, Rudy Wiebe, Eli Mandel, Douglas Barbour, and Robert Kroetsch. The three-page biography by Diane Bessai was the first published information on Watson’s life, a publicity which she always resisted. As she explained in a 1984 interview with Bruce Meyer and Brian O’Riordan, “I’ve wanted what is on the page to speak for itself. I’ve never, not even now, wanted to talk about what I have written ...” (167). She succeeded in living the ideal of the T.S. Eliot poetic persona, “the invisible poet.” She gave few interviews. Two of the longer ones are: “Interview, Sheila Watson” with Pierre Coupey, Roy Kiyooka, and Daphne Marlatt (*The Capilano Review*, 1976), and “It’s What You Say” with Bruce Meyer and Brian O’Riordan, just mentioned (*In Their Words: Interviews with Fourteen Canadian Writers*, 1984). Sheila and Wilfred Watson moved to Nanaimo, BC in 1980. She died in 1998 and Wilfred died seven weeks later.

Critical Responses to *The Double Hook*

Until the publication of Watson’s short stories and essays in a special issue of *Open Letter* in 1974, all critical work focused on *The Double Hook*. In 1985 George Bowering edited a collection of essays, *Sheila Watson and The Double Hook*, which included eighteen articles on the novel. In this volume Bowering selected some initial reviews of Watson’s novel which indicate the mixed, if confused, response to this experimental novel. The better early essays are: Margot Northey’s “Symbolic Grotesque: *The Double Hook*,” which reads the novel as part of the Gothic tradition in Canadian wilderness writing; Leslie Monkman’s “Coyote as Trickster in *The Double Hook*,” which interprets this mythological figure as an evil presence in

the community; and Beverly Mitchell's "Association and Allusion in *The Double Hook*," which looks at Biblical patterns and Christian allusions in the narrative. The best essay is Margaret Morris's 1969 "The Elemental Transcended," which identifies the symbolic structure of the novel based on the four elements and "the archetypal pattern of redemption." Also included in Bowering's volume is Barbara Godard's "Between One Cliché and Another: Language in *The Double Hook*," which looks at Watson's exploration of language in art and communication. In reaction to Godard is Dawn Rae Downton with "Message and Messengers in *The Double Hook*," which looks more closely at Watson's style by analysing some of the secondary characters as messengers.

The most comprehensive bio-critical study of Watson was Stephen Scobie's *Sheila Watson and Her Works* (1984). After a brief biography, Scobie reconstructs the tradition and milieu of modernism which form part of Watson's literary education: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, and John Dos Passos. He points out her reading the mythopoeic theories of Northrop Frye and her studies with Marshall McLuhan, absorbing his mosaic approach to literary interpretation. This methodology directs the reader to analyse a text by linking together the many different references, allusions, quotations, and facts into separate strands in order to arrive at meanings for the whole work. Scobie argues that her spare poetic writing style in *The Double Hook* is a direct reaction against the "clumsy intensities of Frederick Philip Grove; the dreary and derivative banalities of Morley Callaghan; the urbane and academic essay-writing of Hugh MacLennan ..." (6). After a brief review of the critical response to *The Double Hook* up to 1984, Scobie gives a detailed critical analysis of the four stories which appeared together in *Open Letter* (1974). He explains, "Wit plays a great part in establishing the setting of these stories, a setting which is simultaneously local and universal, realist and mythological" (14). In short, he positions Watson as an original writer who refocused the western narrative on language and a sense of place.

Scobie's is also the first comprehensive study of Watson's short stories in which he demonstrates his own sensibility as a poet in his careful reading of these short poetic-prose works. He makes the following striking observation about the fifth story:

And the Four Animals, then, represents a first sketch for the landscape of *The Double Hook*, the major difference being that it is farther back in mythological time, it is not yet peopled—except by the dogs, by Coyote, and the observing eye. For this is a landscape which both exists, autonomously, and also is being brought into existence: it is a landscape created, and landscape *perceived*. (22)

This story, which was first published separately in 1980, was actually written in the early 1950s, before *The Double Hook*, and is a kind of experiment in poetic-prose style and location. The spare language and the peculiar disembodied perspective of “the watching eye” suggest the narrative voice in *The Double Hook*. Scobie correctly observes that the clear link between the short story and the novel is a landscape that is bare, minimal, primitive, and “is simultaneously a specific, localized setting (the BC interior in the drought years of the 1930s) and a symbolic, mythological country ...” (Sheila Watson 19). Scobie goes on to give a very detailed reading of *And the Four Animals* and identifies many parallels to *The Double Hook*. He considers the problem of regional versus international writing in terms of Watson’s writing style and her balancing the influences of Frye’s emphasis on archetypes and McLuhan’s mosaic approach full of eclectic references. Two of Watson’s favourite authors, James Joyce and William Faulkner, demonstrated that small regional settings can be successfully combined with work of universal appeal and meaning. In addition to examining Watson’s language style, Scobie also explores the biblical allusions and religious implications in this story with its final apocalyptic vision.

The final twenty pages of Scobie’s study are devoted to *The Double Hook*. Building on his cogent observations of the language and setting of *And the four animals* and Watson’s own comments on the genesis for her novel, Scobie gives a systematic reading of the characters. In her talk, “What I’m Going to Do,” Watson explained her intentions in *The Double Hook*: “And there was something I wanted to say about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility—if they have no mediating rituals ...” (183). She is referring to the characters in her narrative, both white and First Nations,

who have lost Christian rituals and native traditions. Coyote seems to symbolize this loss of faith in all of the communities in the novel.

In his book, Scobie also examines Margaret Morris's exploration (1969) of the elemental symbolism in the narrative: earth, air, fire, and water. Morris argues that these elements have a real basis in nature and also function symbolically in the novel. For example, we can see that the fire which Greta uses to destroy herself and the Potter house is real, but it also functions symbolically as a ritualistic fire of cleansing and renewal. Fire is also used in many religious rituals, which Watson alludes to throughout the novel. Scobie considers religious symbolism by examining Beverley Mitchell's essay "Association and Allusion" that explores the religious references to the Bible, Catholic ritual, and the Coyote myths. Mitchell argues that nearly all the characters in Watson's novel have associations with figures in the Old Testament and that only Felix Prosper's behaviour reflects the values of the New Testament. This is often indicated by the fragments of the Roman Catholic mass which he repeats as if trying to remember a lost faith, a lost hope.

The most controversial character in *The Double Hook*, Coyote, has been seen as saintly or satanic or a troublemaker who also fools himself. Leslie Monkman's study "Coyote as Trickster" explores the function and meaning of Coyote in the context of American Indian mythology. When Kip remarks "That if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear. That Coyote plotting to catch the glory for himself is fooled and every day fools others [and] how much mischief Coyote can make" (Watson 61), he is alluding to the figure of Coyote as trickster, creator and destroyer, giver and taker, deceiver and self-deceived. Coyote and Mrs. Potter spread fear throughout the isolated community in the valley. People like Felix and Angel confront fear and overcome it, leading to the beginning of hope for the future. At the beginning of *The Double Hook* many of the characters are in a state of paralysis, the insensibility which Watson refers to above. With the return of James and his determination to take on his responsibilities to himself, to Lenchen and their unborn child, and to the rest of the community, the regeneration of the valley begins.

Watson's Language Style

The first study that looks at Watson's language style is Barbara Godard's "Between One Cliché and Another: Language in *The Double Hook*" (1978). Godard argues that Watson's work

might be examined in terms of a "post-modern" rebellion against established order. Such iconoclasm may be detected in the radical exploration of the limits of language undertaken in *The Double Hook* ... a dramatization of the beginning of language and cultural order in a primitive people. ... I should like to suggest that the revolutionary qualities of Watson's writing are a consequence of her femaleness ... [and supported by] her use of a quotation from Gertrude Stein ... remarking that "in this epoch the only real literary thinking has been done by a woman." (149)

In *The Double Hook* Sheila Watson is concerned with exploring the different levels of language and meaning. She uses many different types of language: everyday dialogue, clichés, aphorisms, backwoods expressions, Biblical phrases from the Old and New Testaments, Indigenous myths, Catholic rituals, and parody. "Everyone seems to talk naturally in aphorisms, transforming every particular incident into an occasion for universal truth" (Scobie, *Sheila Watson* 30). There are many examples: "I forget, Kip said. A man can't remember things all his life" (Watson, *The Double Hook* 62). "How can a man know what he wants?" (64). "A man needn't hang himself because he's put his neck through a noose in the dark" (70). "The whole world is a big lot for one girl to wreck," (117) and "We don't choose what we will suffer. We can't even see how suffering will come" (119). Of all the characters, William is the one who speaks mostly in aphorisms: "He was like a gay cock on the outside in his plaid shirt and studded belt" (34). "There's things even a man's brother has to pass by" (74). "Suppose the rock should suddenly begin to move" (76) and "The curious thing about fire, he said, is you need it and you fear it at once" (128). These forms are repeated so often that we soon begin to question the intended meaning of the characters' words as opposed to the ironic meaning. These ritual forms

of speech harden into the empty cliché of modern language detached from meaning and emotion. As Barbara Godard explains:

With its questioning of cliché, its divesting language of associations—thus creating a new way of seeing—with its awareness of silence, with its dramatization of the origins of creativity, *The Double Hook* stands beside contemporary works like those of [other women writers who explore] linguistic experiments. (151)

Sensitive to the thinness of modern speech, Watson finds many ways to disrupt the reader's usual understanding of words and their corresponding links to reality by guiding the reader into a realm of poetic possibilities and aesthetic values beyond the sense of dull quotidian reality. In his 1988 essay, "Originary Grammarians," a comparative study of the Quebec writer Laure Conan and Sheila Watson, E.D. Blodgett examines the language experiments in Watson short stories and argues that the pure bare language of the tribe is more evident in these elemental stories than in the novel. The stories possess only the merest of plots which compel the reader to seek deeper meaning in the language, the allusions, and the symbolism.

Watson in the Digital Age

Since the publication of Bowering's and Scobie's volumes on Sheila Watson's work there has been a continual production of studies, especially in the 1990s. Of significance is the first publication of her first novel, *Deep Hollow Creek*, in 1992, which was written in 1937-38, and the appearance of all her short stories in one volume, *A Father's Kingdom*, in 2004. The "Afterword" for *Deep Hollow Creek* is by novelist Jane Urquhart, and that for *A Father's Kingdom* is by modernist scholar Glenn Willmott.

The 1990s saw no less than nine M.A. and Ph.D. theses on Watson. The explosion in digital communication has re-awakened interest in McLuhan's pronouncements on technology and experiments in writing like *The Double Hook*. This relation is explored in Gregory Betts's article, "Media, McLuhan, and the Dawn of the Electric Age in Sheila Watson's *Deep Hollow Creek* and *The Double Hook*" (2009), and the book he

edited with Paul Hjartarson and Kristine Smitka, *Counterblasting Canada* (2016). The following recent studies strike me as interesting to readers and scholars of Watson's work because they benefit from developments in literary theory, feminist theory, and language studies. The 1990s saw whole chapters devoted to Watson, in contrast to the 1970s when *The Double Hook* received only brief comments. In his book *Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West* (1994), Arnold Davidson devotes a chapter to *The Double Hook* and examines it in the context of Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939) and Robert Krotesch's *Badlands* (1975). This volume makes it clear that Watson is recognized as a major contributor to the creation of a literature about Alberta and the Canadian West. In her book *Imagining Culture: New World Narrative and the Writing of Canada* (1995), Margaret Turner also spends a chapter analysing *The Double Hook* and describes Watson's writing as she "moves between literal and metaphoric planes in her dismantling and construction of new world discourse" (79).

Watson's short stories are the subject of Valerie Legge's article, "Sheila Watson's 'Antigone': Anguished Rituals and Public Disturbances" (1992). In her critical article, "Canadian Letters, Dead Referents: Reconsidering the Critical Construction of *The Double Hook*" (1993-94), Donna Palmateer Pennee examines the canonization of Watson's novel and argues that "sacrifice is central to the canonization of this novel, the formation of a literary-critical community, and by extension, the formation of the nation 'on its way to itself'—or, that beneath the canonization site is a dead woman's body ... a mother is murdered (on the very first page of the novel) so that the son's narrative can go forward ..." (235). The first detailed study of *Deep Hollow Creek* is Glenn Willmott's "The Nature of Modernism in *Deep Hollow Creek*" (1995). As the volume I edited in 2015, *Sheila Watson: Essays on Her Works*, indicates, her novels and short stories continue to garner critical attention, a recognition of the tangible contributions she made in Alberta and beyond. As a student and academic in Edmonton, I personally witnessed Watson's work first hand.

Before her death in 1998, Sheila Watson donated her literary documents to the University of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. At St. Michael's was Fred Flahiff, whom she made her literary executor and biographer. In 2005 Flahiff published *Always Someone to Kill the Doves: A Life of Sheila Watson*, which provides valuable information on Watson's personal life, marriage, and writing activities. A long-time friend, Flahiff

lets Sheila speak for herself by including a seventy-page excerpt from her Paris diary of 1955-56. In his critical analysis of these seventy pages, George Melnyk links Sheila's writing style with her two novels. Using access to the Sheila Watson Archives, Margaret Morriss published "'No short cuts': The Evolution of *The Double Hook*" (2002), a study of the various revisions that Watson worked on between the completion of the manuscript in 1952 and its final publication in 1959.

In her 1974-75 statement "What I'm Going to Do," Sheila Watson questions the idea "that if you write a novel it had to be, in some mysterious way, international." So she wrote a "very provincial, very local, and very much part of your own milieu" novel (182). In Canada Watson was vindicated by the success of her novel. She was vindicated in another way as well: the international reception of *The Double Hook* which has been translated into Swedish as *Dubblekroken* (1963), into French as *Sous l'oeil de coyote* (1976), and into Italian as *Il Doppio amo* (1992). We also have critical essays on the novel in Italian and German (Kuester). The international dissemination of all this information on the writing of Sheila Watson is now made easier by the internet.

Sheila Watson spent most of her life trying to be the invisible writer. Nevertheless, her reputation grew and has continued to flourish. With the publication of *Deep Hollow Creek* and *A Father's Kingdom*, her status in Canadian literature is assured.

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