

## The Double Ending of *The Mountain and the Valley*: From Aristotle to Dante

Maia Bhojwani

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Article abstract

Examining the two endings of Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* separately may shed new light on the present conviction that David's failure to become an artist is the result of a moral flaw or the inevitable outcome of an internal deficiency. While the novel seems to have two conclusions -- the false but tragic conclusion of the young man left out of the war, and the true but ironic ending of his death in the mountain -- considering the double ending suggests a change in the concepts governing Buckler's characterization of David. The themes and images in the first ending are Romantic and state a Wordsworthian belief in both the imaginative and affective stores of happy childhood and the reciprocity of man and nature. The experiences expressed in the Epilogue, or second ending, deconstruct this earlier process.

# The Double Ending of *The Mountain and the Valley*: From Aristotle to Dante

MAIA BHOJWANI

THE LONG GESTATION of the book that has become *The Mountain and the Valley* may explain some of the anomalies in the text that continue to fascinate generations of readers and critics. The facts of its composition have been summarized by Alan R. Young. As Young relates the chronology, Ernest Buckler claimed in a letter dated May 15, 1951, that David's death was "the very first thing I wrote; the foundation for the whole thesis" (203). However, Buckler was contemplating a "farm" novel as early as 1939, and knew he had "the foetus of a novel" by 1946. At that time he had sent out a series of short stories to the publishers Harper and Brothers, asking if it was "too late for a book which had anything to do with the war" (196). The publishers informed him that war themes were desperately unpopular and advised him to make the war only an incident in the story of a young man forced to watch life from the sidelines (198). By 1951, the narrative of the frustrations of this young man had developed into the psychological portrait of a "recurrent dichotomy in David's nature" (202). This, presumably, occurred *after* the writing of the opening chapter describing his death was complete, if that was indeed the very first thing Buckler wrote. The chapter was split into two as an effective framing device, and the death reserved for the Epilogue — by Buckler's own account, "the crowning point of the whole dramatic irony" (203). However, the novel as we have it bears the traces of its origin, so that it has two conclusions: the false but tragic conclusion of the young man left out of the war, and the true but ironic ending of his death on the mountain.<sup>1</sup>

If the narrative is removed from its frame, it culminates in the full, tragic close of a complex plot according to Aristotle's *Poetics*,<sup>2</sup> whereas the denouement in the Epilogue ties together the three different strands of David's journey up the mountain, his discovery of his vocation, and his

death. The two structural resolutions are placed at important moments in David's life. They represent his maturity, when the question of what David is to be has finally been answered by what he has become, and the close of his life, when he completes the long-deferred journey to the mountain-top towards which his entire being has been tending.

The space between them marks a shift in the narrator's relation to his character. Even though David is "transparently autobiographical" (Bissell, *Ernest* 70), and the reader is brought close to his sensibility, Buckler remains in control of his portrayal and preserves his objectivity and detachment throughout. In the Epilogue, however, the distance between protagonist and author collapses despite his own ironic intentions. Examining the two endings separately may shed new light on the present conviction that David's failure to become an artist is the result of a moral flaw or the inevitable outcome of an internal deficiency. This view has come to supersede the environmental thesis by which the artist is doomed to failure in an uncomprehending and unsympathetic culture. The cultural nationalism implicit in the early view, notably developed in Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (186-87) and D. G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* (23-25), still haunts the Canadian mantra of the failed artist, although recent commentary identifies it more broadly as a problem of modernism. W.B. Yeats has stated the modern dilemma succinctly: "The intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the life, or of the work,/ And if it take the second must refuse/ A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark" (278). David is unable to make this choice and is therefore forced to forego both; that he should have a final vision reconciling incompatible aims may well be part of the crowning irony of Buckler's plan.

## 1

The reader's response to David in *The Mountain and the Valley* may be guided by David's revised response to Herb Hennessey, who is the village solitary, recluse, and outcast, an uncanny object of wonder to the young David, haunting his dreams. As a child, he had felt pity for Herb but not fear, rather "the sweetest, safest sort of exaltation: that such a thing could be, however incredibly, but not ever for him" (59). He would wonder in his later years, when he had himself become as solitary as Herb, whether there wasn't some justice for the unconscious cruelty in that thought. In other words, pity and fear were the correct responses to Herb's situation and are by analogy the correct responses to David's situation.

David's many faults have been identified by his critics as narcissism, egotism, immaturity, and vindictiveness, and it may seem contrary to try to rehabilitate his reputation in the face of such opposition. Yet in his aspect as an alienated solitary, Buckler does seem to invite both pity for and fear at David's plight. Pity and fear govern the formal literary structures of Greek tragedy, the emotions Aristotle deemed necessary for its effect. Reversal in expectation, or *peripateia*, assists in arousing pity, if we are led to expect good things for the hero (or if he has built up his own hopes), while recognition, or *anagnorisis*, shows him the true nature of the causal chain that has been unfolding, and our fear arises from our self-regarding, albeit sympathetic, identification with him (Nussbaum 279). David's situation has reversed itself, and he recognizes the part he has played in losing the great good fortune that was seemingly the promise of his early years. The narrator emphasizes the irreversible, irredeemable nature of this loss, as unlimited potential is ultimately curbed by the narrowing of possibilities. Here are the *peripateia* and *anagnorisis* of the plot:

This was the toppling moment of clarity which comes once to everyone, when he sees the face of his whole life in every detail. He saw then that the unquestioned premise all his calculations had been built on was false. He realized for the first time that his feet must go on in their present path, because all the crossroad junctions had been left irretrievably far behind. Anything your own hands had built, he had always thought, your own hands could destroy. You could build a wall about yourself, for safety's sake, but whenever you chose you could level it. That wasn't true, he saw now. After a while you could beat against the wall all you liked, but it was indestructible. The cast of loneliness became pitted in your flesh. It was as plain for others to see and shy away from as the slouch of a convict. (268-69)

Seeing the face of one's own life is in itself both a recognition and a turning point when identity is finally formed, fixed, and known as such; the narrator believes that such a moment comes to everyone, without exception. David realizes the affective loss he has incurred in growing up: "My own life brimmed and emptied so soon, and I could never fill it again" (269). He suffers anew from the deprivation of the natural bonds of friendship, family, and the male camaraderie of wartime action, but he is trapped inescapably within the bright glare of his tragic knowledge, "like someone looking for a place to run, the blind way people run out of doors when their clothes are on fire" (271). Grotesquely, "with a wild comical stagger," he vents his rage by hacking at the poor parsnips at his

feet until, all passion spent, his mind is still, “like the stillness of snow sifting through the spokes of the wagon wheels” (272). Severely chastened, he returns to his chores, which are again beyond his strength, but they are now dignified by his fortitude and endurance, as the comparison with Joseph, his father and the novel’s model of rectitude, makes clear.

So far, David’s predicament has been defined in terms of the tragedy of the un-lived life, a life whose isolation puts it outside any sphere of purposeful action, thwarting the proper use of its special capacities, although at this point he understands no more than his lonely exclusion. His intellectual error (the *hamartia* or fallibility to which human excellence is prone) was his belief that he had free will and could exercise it at discretion. The consequences of his solitude have taken him by surprise and he is tragically unable to undo its effects. He is responsible for his fate — it lies buried like a seed in the soil of his nature — but it cannot be said that he has made considered, deliberate choices, knowing them as conscious desires and intentions to be acted upon.

*The Nicomachean Ethics* distinguishes the passions and faculties, which we have by nature, from character. Character alone invites praise or blame. It is disposed to virtue or vice, which we call good or bad: these are unequivocally modes of choice (Aristotle 35). David has merely been moved by his feelings at every point in the narrative; he has never acted from settled principle or an awareness of issues. Once the impetus of his temper exhausts itself, he is left either uncertain or vacillating between wanting revenge and feeling guilt, regret, remorse, and even an “awful penitence” (176). Unable to undo his earlier actions, his present intentions fall short of the passing moment. Anna is his twin but also his foil and, as Barbara Pell observes, she acts in opposition to the hereditary jealousy and resentments that come naturally to her too, showing an emotional maturity in her relation to Toby (61). David does not learn to exercise a similar moral will, and his character is unformed, the result of habitual action but not of willed choice, whether for good or ill. Virtue is obtained in its exercise: “It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference” (Aristotle, *Ethics* 29). For all his introversion, David unthinkingly allows his temperament to determine his conduct at all the “crossroad junctions,” and Buckler’s necessitarian outlook — or David’s despair — forecloses the future for him. Although the plot is Aristotelian in its construction, David’s motivation does not fall within the realm of the ethical. He is impelled instead by drives obscure to him, for which he cannot be wholly blamed.

In its insistence on human agency and intelligibility, Aristotle's theory of tragedy is secular, optimistic, and naturalistic, as the practice of the tragic Greek poets and dramatists is not. For them, the gods represent forces beyond human comprehension — whatever in our destiny is hopeless, mysterious, and opaque to human reason (Halliwell 234). Buckler's novel is naturalistic, but it still gestures towards a mysterious fatality — a determinism beyond that of heredity and circumstance — located within the dark tangle of impulses and emotions in the psyche that remain forever inaccessible to knowledge. Hence David's mother Martha's irrational and irresistible jealous silences, which descend upon her from sources over which she has no control. The scenarios of David's more complicated inner life can be explained by the dualistic picture of the instinctual life — divided between the sexual instinct and the death instinct — in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Here Freud famously proposes that the instincts are conservative, seeking to revert to an earlier condition of inertia and inorganic existence by the circuitous routes peculiar to the development of the organism. As a consequence, the aim of every organism is to die in its own fashion. "The aim of all life is death," Freud writes, and explains even self-preservation as a function that ensures this return by no other way than that which is immanent in the organism itself (613). This functioning of the death instinct and the sexual instinct is reflected in the polarities of hate and love, when they are transferred to an object, as a commingling of aggression and affection. When the death instinct is forced away from the ego in the narcissistic libido, it emerges as sadism in relation to the love object, serving a sexual function; but when it turns around on the subject, on his own ego, it becomes masochism, there being no difference in principle between an instinct turning from the object to the ego, or the ego to the object.

This theory fits David in every respect: an early death holds a special attraction for him, and his life derives its momentum from his longing to reach the transcendent mountain where Joseph, Spurge Gorman, and Pete Delahunt go to find their various deaths. On reflecting that David alone is left on the farm to pursue a way of life he is eminently unsuited for, Ellen wonders with her customary prescience whether "he had a love of this place as binding as blood, or as it sometimes seemed, a hatred of it so dark and stubborn as to fascinate him beyond the fascination of any possible kind of love, she didn't know" (220), and David himself will acknowledge early on the "fascination of hating someone he loved," until it grows to be a bond of fratricidal proportions (81). His sexual encounters

with Effie are singularly devoid of erotic desire, naturally, as they are too young, and marked by self-centred aggression. Indeed, they are sadistic, as Effie's pathetic attempts at repair afterwards indicate, and arise in each instance from a wish to prove his sexual prowess before his male peers, although his initial pity for her, especially encouraged by her resemblance to his twin, Anna, relieves the stark picture of his selfishness. The fine stoic endurance he inherits from Joseph degenerates into a masochistic enjoyment of pain, the grinding, self-biting satisfactions he derives from unpleasure in his work on the farm. Buckler may not have been thinking of Freudian polarities while constructing the "recurrent dichotomy in David's nature (Country boy or city boy? Naive or sophisticated? Harsh or tender? Over-child or over-adult? Serious or comic? Homebody or alien?)" (Young 202), but they help to explain the presence of paralyzing internal divisions, conflicts, and perversions of natural instincts gone wrong in the psychological portrait of the artist we do have.

Granting the "deep concern" the reader feels for David's fate as a projection of the author, Claude Bissell adds the qualification that intellectually he is a "crippled Ernest" (*Ernest* 70). The narrator's deliberate crippling of his character is nowhere as evident as it is in the depiction of David's selection of the themes for the story he begins, to be called "Thanks for listening." Had he written of these other things that buzzed inside his head, he would have accurately transcribed the novel we are reading:

How you could love the land's face and the day's face, but how they never loved you back; the sun would come out brighter than usual the day your father died, and the wind would cut, as blind and relentless as ever, the night your brother was lost in the woods ... How a man could be trapped by his own nature ... How, though you cut open his flesh you still couldn't penetrate the skin of separateness each man walked around in ... How this place had aged, with change ... How the knitted warmth between its people had ravelled, until each was almost as alone in his own distraction now as the city people were ... (255)

Instead, he chooses to write overblown pulp fiction, the common material of daydreams; he is as usual ashamed of being found out in his creative efforts and destroys his writing. In his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," Freud attributes the shame we feel in revealing our daydreams to the fact that they are a kind of infantile fantasy that we ought to have outgrown, a form of play no longer suitable to the adult mind. At the

same time he concedes that the heroic projections of myth and literature have their origins here, just as David's imaginings of his role as "the greatest" compensate for the drab realities of his life and reassure his wounded ego (436-43). In this instance, he writes to get the war over with and to show that even though he was not physically fit to take part in the action, he had missed nothing essential to the experience of his generation and understood it equally well.

His earlier attempt at writing the story of his relations with his brother, Chris, was a contrary attempt to write from experience, its delivery similarly a "cleansing cathartic" (190). His mixed feelings would seem to be the reason for his not finishing it. Initially, he begins by wanting to absolve Chris of blame in his own near-fatal fall during the pig-splitting episode. Then his sorrow over the newly emergent fact that Rachel has trapped Chris into marrying Charlotte swings to jealous envy, as he feels himself left out of the drama. The events occurring to his older brother appear "newslike" in comparison with which his own lesser ego and his existence fade into narrative. Glad that he had not annulled the soreness between them or thrown away his "equalizing weapon," he proceeds to blacken the words in his scribbler (193). His creative energies are throttled at their source, not so much by his moral flaws or his conception of language as by the prior dynamics of his psychological make-up, for which I have proposed a Freudian explanation. Freud's biological definition of an instinct, in his "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," is that of a concept on the frontier of the somatic and the mental, its working a measure of the demand made on the mind by reason of its connection with the body. This further exculpates David of *willful* wrongdoing. His addictive, untutored impulses suffice to drag him dangerously down into "The fury and the mire of human veins" (Yeats 280). How he emancipates himself from these guilty, shameful, secretive depths and regains the good of the intellect is the burden of the Epilogue.

## 2

Toby's departure for the war is the occasion for David's reflection that "the train of your own life went by and left you standing there in the field" (271), but until then his solitary existence has not been unpleasant and is even sustaining. It is only when his subjectivity collides with that of others that he feels his bareness exposed, and his self-consciousness surfaces as an image of his own face and body intervening between him and the world.



We might expect that it is Buckler's intention to develop his characterization as a hero of Existentialist *angst*, and indeed the Prologue describes David's ennui as he listens to the empty silence, his own "disappearance of voice" indicating his hollow, estranged, disaffected existence (Van Rys 67). However, a shift of register occurs in the Epilogue and, although the two categories are not mutually exclusive, the David who climbs the log road conforms to the portrait of Emerson's Idealist, or the Transcendentalist as he appeared in 1842 in Emerson's essay of the same name.

Emerson divides the world into two sects, the Materialists and the Idealists. The former base their thinking on experience and the data gathered by the senses, while the latter found it on consciousness, believing that the senses are not final and give us only representations of things — representations which are of the same nature as the faculty that reports them, so that it is always our own thought that we perceive — and what things are in themselves they cannot tell. Ellen's skill as an artisan and her success at storytelling would classify her as the former, while David's inability to represent reality with exactness in words, his "simultaneous facility and difficulty with language" recently examined by Stephen Ross, could be ascribed to the impassable distance between thought and thing — or event — in subjective idealism (67).

While the Materialist insists on facts, history, circumstance, and the animal wants of man, the idealist, which according to Emerson is the more highly evolved type, insists on the power of thought, will, inspiration, miracle, and individual culture. Mind is the only reality, according to the idealist hypothesis of the phenomenal nature of the world: it acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being and the evidence of the world's being. Yet, concludes Emerson in a caveat on the idealist position in his essay "Spirit,"

if it only deny the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end. Then the heart resists it, because it balks the affections in denying substantive being to men and women. (30)

Buckler explores a comparable hypothetical condition in David that denies the existence of matter (and the substantive being of another in the planning and plotting by which he shapes reality to his imagination), but without reference either to a first cause or to meaning, which is Emerson's final cause. Janice Kulyk Keefer has described David's setting out on the

road to the top of the mountain as an intricate narrative of perception, and I agree that it is with this “narrative of perception” (like Emerson’s “splendid labyrinth of my perceptions”) that Buckler himself is most insistently engaged (225).

The glass of the window pane where David stands doubles as the Idealist’s glass of the mind, making touch between any two things impossible. The log road he walks on during moments of emotional disturbance to experience shafts of clarity — his flesh levitating as it seems — apparently leads to the transcendent truth built into the top of the symbolic mountain. He becomes both seer, “one great white naked eye of self-consciousness, with only its own looking to look at,” and what he sees, “it was as if the outline of the frozen landscape *became* his consciousness” (275). His meeting with the materialist Steve, and his indulgence of Steve’s fondness for body jokes, marks David’s passage past them.

Emerson’s definition of good writing as “perpetual allegories” in his essay “Nature” is exemplified by Buckler’s prose. Of the speaker’s mental process Emerson says, “a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought” (15). More usually, thought follows perception of the visible world in Buckler’s writing: “the day is the determinant,” but David’s subjectivity shapes nature in his own image (47). The bareness of the landscape gradually acquires face and flesh as his numbing alienation yields to guilt and his climb up the purgatorial mountain becomes an allegory of penitence and reconciliation.

Coexistence with Toby and delight in his strong young flesh had enabled Anna to exclaim “It’s perfect here” as they walked up the mountain (260). The self-dependent, self-sustaining solitude of the Emersonian Idealist enables David to make the same remark at the same place as soon as he finds himself “absolutely alone” (280). He discerns a thread of similarity fusing his sensory impressions and memories by a kind of apperception, and lays time out flat for, like space, it is an intuition of the mind. His Proustian “translation” returns him for an instant to the pure potentiality of his childhood, but the illusion passes and Emerson’s “eternal distinction between the soul and the world” asserts itself in all the accusing voices of the world that hunger to be seen and heard (30). He thinks he must *be* each one in turn, annihilating his own identity in the process, to silence their accusations. But the impossibility of attending not only to the multiplicity of things and thoughts around him but also to those that had existed which he had never seen and known, and those that might have been, overwhelms him. Reflecting on the causal chain that

led to his father's death leads to a similar impasse of thought, as the hand that held the axe that felled the tree loses both agency and significance to become a meaningless word: "And 'n' is a letter in the word, shaped exactly that way, and sounded by exactly that movement of the tongue, and in exactly how many other words?" (290). The thought of rendering the nature of thinking itself traps him in an infinite regress, hysterically screaming "stop" until the blockage is released at the peak and he sees the valley lying below.

He resolves to write of the lives he has known: "I know how it is with everything, I will put it down and they will see that I know" (292). The summit yields the Emersonian knowledge that Unity or a "single core of meaning," like a beam of light or a law in physics, might illuminate the inexhaustible variety of human experience (292). The narrator's comment that David does not consider how he would find this unifying principle, as if it could be stated as a proposition, is a reflection on the futility of this philosophical endeavour. The self, too, proves incapable of being transcended; neither does all "mean egotism" vanish, for David still wishes to impress the people of Entremont, nor is the soul caught up by the Over-soul (Emerson 6). Instead, he comforts himself modestly with the notion that penitence might yet be greater than the offence among the good people of Entremont. He hopes that his writing will not only give an absolving voice to the dear departed but also acquit him of denials or failures of love, while showing them that these were never intended. His imagination leaps to his own becoming the greatest writer in the whole world and relaying the news of his prize-winning book to Anna in "one final transport of self-deception" (Young 203). At this point his heart stops. Whether he dies a sorry victim of vanity or finds the will to affirm, as Robert Gibbs suggests in his Afterword to the novel, is the question that divides most interpretations of the book (302). But the point is that David desires a Yeatsian "perfection" of both the life and the work, not one at the expense of the other, and has no wish to transcend human happiness for any greater good. Had it been retained intact, had his nature not been hobbled at the start, had innocence not been corroded by experience, he might have been the writer Buckler became by eliminating David — the author principally of *Ox-Bells and Fireflies*.

The Idealist (and Theosophist) closer in time to Buckler than Emerson was Lawren Harris, the premier painter of mountain scenery in Canada. Dennis Reid reports that by 1950, when Harris was sixty-five, a subtle shift had taken place in the way Harris's mystical painting was perceived across the country. He quotes one contemporary critic's descrip-

tion of Harris's abstractions as "The art of a Puritan who, by the rigorous imposition of theory, strives to create some kind of metaphysical ecstasy in paint" (52). Both Buckler's mountain and his skepticism about — or disillusionment with — the metaphysical ecstasy it affords are therefore grounded in the period during which the novel was written.

*The Mountain and the Valley* traverses the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting. The book makes an allusion to the idealized realism of Millet's rural scenes, for which there is a Maritime precedent in Roberts's sonnet "The Sower," its rhyming soil and toil enclosing the informing myth of the land. It is represented in the novel by Martha and Joseph; picking up potatoes on their knees in the acre field, "they looked as if they were praying" (119). Then there is the Impressionism of "the day of evocative light" passage (112-13). The Cubism of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, mentioned in its context as an analogue for the pattern and design found in the structural regularities of the smallest particles of nature, has been interestingly discussed by Laurence Ricou as an analogue for the excessive superimpositions of slightly differentiated images (61). He suggests that these convey the multiplicity of impressions and associations and contribute to the "high metaphysical style" of Buckler's prose, originally identified by Bissell in his Introduction to the 1961 edition of the novel (x). Buckler himself has described it as his "pointilliste" method, arising from his mathematical turn of mind as "the 'equals' obsession" (Bissell, *Ernest* 120-21). I am inclined to find a precedent for it in Emerson's correspondences, and Buckler will rely on this term for those "tangents of import behind the simplest fact" in *Nova Scotia: Window on the Sea* (110). To these historical allusions we must add the riddling abstractions of the symbolic art of the Epilogue — the triangular mountain and the concentric circles of Ellen's rug (drawn, incidentally, by David, and unlike the rich landscape designs of her previous rugs). These forms were considered essential by Kandinsky, another Theosophist, in conceptualizing space and constituting the "primary pair of contrasting planes," the circle representing the horizon (Davis 126). Ann Davis explains the meaning of these forms within the theosophical scheme: "theosophists believed that aspiration, both devotional and intellectual, was depicted as a pointed form, while thought on the Logos took a circular form" (127). There is a curious passage in *Nova Scotia: Window on the Sea* in which Buckler writes of Nova Scotia, "it forms an isosceles triangle with the man who loves it; welding him, where their equal sides converge, to the universals" (112). The geometrical precision of this difficult-to-visualize image can leave no doubt that Buckler was aware of the symbolic content

of abstract art, whatever his source — whether he had read Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, was acquainted with the Canadian painters, or knew the theosophical writings of Madame Blavatsky herself.

In reacting against the materialism of Darwinist thought, Theosophy tried to parallel Darwin's account of history and physical evolution with an equivalent evolution on a spiritual plane, advocating "the Path" of introspection as the means by which humankind could ascend the evolutionary neoplatonic ladder from self to community to godhead. In Canada, its hope of universal brotherhood assisted in promoting a socialist future, this vision of community interrupting the unmediated leap to godhead in the American Transcendentalist tradition of the Emersonian variety (Lacombe 113). The Toronto Theosophical Society was active in the 1930s, when Buckler was in Toronto. Comparing *The Mountain and the Valley* with *Look Homeward, Angel*, David Williams decides that the proud isolation and exalted individualism of the American artist give way to a sense of community in the Canadian work (158), but Pell is suspicious of the sentimental "shine" that David's euphoria sheds over the valley (69), and Keefer finds the idea of David's tormented sensibility giving voice to the robust natural life of the villagers so incongruous that she thinks he must be killed off (228). The novel points to the economic reasons for the slow dissolution of community and shows the social results of the passing of a rural way of life; David's wish to celebrate his valley glosses over the realities of his discontent. Buckler's parody of ascent up the neoplatonic ladder does seem to extend to the theosophical notion of community.

Since Theosophy was a syncretic philosophy derived from many religious traditions, its tenets overlap with Transcendentalist beliefs. Reid summarizes its teachings as follows:

Theosophy teaches that everything that exists is inextricably interconnected in a great cosmic movement of becoming. Thus, every action, good or bad, carries infinite repercussions, or 'karma.' Theosophists also believe that everything is governed by one immutable law, which is truth, and that man once had direct knowledge of this essential unity, but lost it through divisive sectarianism and an intemperate pursuit of materialism. Only by turning every effort to understanding the unity of all things, to knowing the essential motivating spirit of all being, can one aspire again to the perfect condition of pure spirituality, entirely free of gross matter. Since karma is cumulative, spiritual progress can be achieved through reincarnation. (10)

Theosophical ideas, like American Transcendentalism, encourage an aesthetics of the infinite, an art of the epiphany, by which the veil is parted and “the truth” or this essential unity shines through. Buckler’s text will play with the paradox that A.S. Byatt has observed in another context, that “Linear stories of death carry inside themselves images of infinity, as topologies of infinity carry inside themselves images of death” (140). As a linear story of death, David walks up the log road on his path to enlightenment, but his quest is baffled by the limitations of the human mind to understand the infinity of becoming, or to trace causality to its origins, or to discover Madame Blavatsky’s one truth in this life. Her image of a ray of pure white light does, however, appear at David’s death: “And then the blackness turned to grey and then to white: an absolute white, made of all the other colours but of no colour itself at all” (294). But the attainment of the “perfect condition of pure spirituality, entirely free of gross matter” casts doubt on the theosophical project and the concluding pages refute this specific idealist claim (Reid 10).

Simultaneously with David’s death, the snow begins to fall and Ellen inserts the white centre that completes her rug, calling for David, “‘Where is that child?’ she said. ‘You never know where that child is’”(295). The design of the rug, a series of concentric circles, resembles the traditional Aristotelian world-picture, an ordered cosmos or a Closed World, best articulated in Dante’s *Paradiso*. It is conspicuously a human artefact — we witness its making — while the snowscape providing David’s life with its closure resembles the Infinite Universe of the Greek Atomists. These two views of space belong to contradictory schools of thought in the history of Greek philosophy, as David Furley demonstrates in *The Greek Cosmologists* (1-8). Madame Blavatsky’s synthesis has the merit of reconciling them, by faith rather than reason, as two sides of the same coin. She explains the paradoxical nature of space, both a “limitless void” and a “conditional fullness,” as being “on the plane of absolute abstraction, the ever-incognisable Deity, . . . and on that of *mayavic* perception, . . . the absolute Container of all that is, whether manifested or unmanifested: it is, therefore, that ABSOLUTE ALL” (qtd. in Davis 122). It is no accident that the symbols prominent in Theosophy — the triangular mountain or pyramid, the concentric circles, and the universal void — cluster together at the end of the Epilogue. The paradox of space is invoked only to be separated into its antithetical elements, the Closed World and the Infinite Universe, and the final emphasis of the novel is uncompromisingly material.

When David examines his thought process, he finds his stream of consciousness breaking down or “forking” endlessly like a “chicken-wire pattern of atoms” (290). The universe is made of the same irreducible stuff as his brain, and the first fall of snow mimics the cosmology of the Atomists, whose point of view was remarkably like that of modern science (Russell 85). Snow falls, initially flying in all directions like the original motion of atoms in a void, until it descends to the valley through the action of a vortex: the mountain slopes, which shut the valley in completely. Flakes collide and cling together to form matter. David’s life slowly departs with the vital heat, vital heat constituting soul in the speculations of the Atomists, who do not admit the possibility of either a transcendent or an immaterial soul. The partridge that rises from the ground — no soaring skylark — is not “free of gross matter” (Reid 10). It is of the earth, earthy: the emphasis falls on its heavy body, the weight of its flight straight downwards, and the intense, swooping exactness with which it descends, enacting the laws of physics or mechanical necessity that lie at the heart of the tree that kills Joseph.

The novel’s closing scene, with its chaotic rain (or snow) of falling atoms, “like tiny white feathers from a broken wing” (295), reiterates the epistemological problem of the knowing subject that has undercut both the transcendental and theosophical renditions of David’s experience. David’s other premise that reality is mental and depends on the relation of knower and known, while accounting for his “perceptual hysteria” (Keefer 226), also proves to be false: the world continues to exist without David’s being there to perceive it, the snow covering him and the log on the ground alike. Soon the ground is all white and “on the trackless road there were no tracks but now a white track could be made” (295). Another David will tread the same ground, the possibilities of his mind under erasure in a reality defined by density and weight. Whether this mind can affirm subjective validity against material inimical to lasting impression is left in doubt. In effect, the closing scene inverts idealist assumptions by evoking a universe of matter to which the mind is a stranger — extraneous, superfluous, dispensable.

What then are we to make of David’s whiteout, an absolute white made of all the colours but of no colour in itself? Ellen stands in a similar focus of light at her husband’s grave, “the one sure spot” (84), an achieved perfection where all is unchangeably ended and nothing can be added or taken away. Its neoplatonic imagelessness has overlaid and enamelled the phenomenal world as seen under the fleeting, ephemeral aspect of the changing light of the year, but in its dramatic context the moment is

ambiguous. Should we think that David has once more been deluded by his nostalgia for the absolute or should we say that, like Virginia Woolf's Lily Briscoe, he has had his vision? This question arises because the colour symbolism is elaborated alternately as a "conditional fullness" in the rug, and as a "limitless void" in the snowbound landscape (Davis 122).

Buckler admired Dante and Shakespeare, for having done it consummately before him (Cameron 10). *The Divine Comedy* may be the narrative subtext that joins the symbolism of David's South Mountain vision of an Earthly Paradise (from Purgatory), to Ellen's rug, a diagram of the Heavens. Anna might be considered the equivalent of the beloved Beatrice, the twin with whom David unites his soul in an image of completion. The novel exploits the interval between the last two canticles of *The Divine Comedy* to present an unbridgeable chasm. Its narrative progression suggests that David loses faith, hope, and charity — the theological virtues of the Christmas pageant — as he grows older. He regains hope and charity at the end (in an unironic reading) which are insufficient without faith. Faith is precluded from a post-theological world; it is given to Ellen who, as Ross argues, bears the ideological burden of the pre-modern (59). The insertion of the white centre of Ellen's rug is peculiarly her own personal act, the lace coming from a dress she had worn.

Dorothy Sayers makes a distinction between the literal meaning of Dante's story, a journey through the three realms of the afterlife, and its allegorical significance, and more specifically its moral sense, as it speaks of the condition of the soul in this life (*Hell* 67-69, 15). This moral sense predominates in Buckler's handling of his characters, who are known not so much by their punishment or penance in the afterlife as by the quality of their suffering in this life. All the characters finally find themselves "limited and alone in the inner worlds their perceptions have created," particularly at the moment of death (MacDonald 199). Effie, as Love, dies peacefully in her soft clean bed; Joseph, Martha, Bess, Spurge Gorman, Pete Delahunt, David, and Toby variously exemplify Dantean ascent and descent themes. Chris, too, circles round and round in his frustration in the cellar of Rachel Gorman's house. In fact, Rachel causes much of the marital discord in the Edenic valley-world, but to pursue her faintly melodramatic role to its archetypal conclusion goes against the novel's naturalism.

In his small but richly suggestive book on Dante, Erich Auerbach develops the view that the pilgrim-poet of *The Divine Comedy* encounters the fulfilled destinies of historical and mythic characters (his own



as yet unfulfilled), as they stand in the eye of Providence, gathered up in an eternal order (132-33). The eschatological certainties of the poem derive from a vast medieval Thomist-Aristotelian framework. The modern novelist can draw on neither the framework nor its certainties; as a consequence he is driven once more to demonstrating the problematic nature of human judgement by confounding the infernal and purgatorial inflections of Dante's universe in *Entremont*. David is mistaken in believing that he has caused Effie's death and he is unable to maintain the intensity of his purgatorial remorse over time however hard he might try.

Similarly, the deaths by drowning of Spurge Gorman and Pete Delahunt are surrounded by innuendo; heroic sacrifice is implicated in motives of despair or revenge, although the mountain setting is perhaps intended to ennoble their end, as in Joseph's case (and Toby's, since Anna has her premonition at its peak). Martha and Joseph, cripplingly close and strainingly far, are like the couples helplessly conjoined in Dante's nether realms who are one another's doom. Yet the theological implications of Bess's suicide are challenged by the pathos of her newfound fidelity to Fred and his defiant love for her. Invoking the god of small things, Buckler has said that the novel celebrates love (Cameron 11); the consolations and perils of the love stories he tells, however, suggest an ambivalent good, imbued with human frailty. Sacrificial Effie, forgiving everything and understanding nothing, is a far cry from Beatrice, conduit of Light and Love in Dante's poem (Brandeis 122).

Nevertheless, the strict justice of Dante's theological template based on acts of moral choice is never questioned and it retains its validity, even as speculation on the afterlife is cut short. Within Dante's scheme, David's sins would have been pride, wrath, and envy, the lower sins of egotism in Purgatory (Sayers, *Purgatory* 62): these are the givens of his nature, the predispositions he is born with. Memory defines him as he climbs — he is trapped by time, reliving his past (Kertzer 85) — but the contrition and new resolve that come to him in his dying moments bespeak change and the decisive emergence of the moral will, at last capable of choosing rightly although as yet untried in action and unpracticed in virtue. The admixture of self-deception, however, is characteristically Shakespearean, and A.T. Seaman has proposed Lear's wheel of fire as the paradigm for David's purgatory (171). As Lear dies believing Cordelia lives, David dies imagining telling Anna that his book won a prize, but on the whole the Lear mould sits uneasily on David. Tragic suffering of the dark, Shakespearean kind is missing from his end, the Aristotelian pity and fear necessary for the tragic effect having been used up immedi-

ately before the Epilogue, which is then concerned with the attempt to transcend tragic experience by escaping from selfhood. It is at this that Buckler directs his irony.

The two endings of the novel contain parallel moments of retrospect: in his tragic recognition, David sees the face of his own life as that of one who would always be a stranger, but in his ascent up the mountain, the valley itself seems a stranger who reveals the face of a friend. If he was wrapped in purgatorial flame before, now firelight and sun-shadow add a forgiving softness and warmth to the view. When David invests the mountain with extraordinary significance, reading the signs of guilt and reconciliation into his ascent, is he again mistaken? The Emersonian Idealist can know nothing definitively about a reality other than that of his own mind. The idea has altered but the facts have not — David's imagination may almost light up the valley with a paradisaal glow, but just as his book does not get written, the reunion with Anna does not happen, not on this side of paradise. The mountaintop is less a place of release than a "Purgatory blind" — without exit, where the ascent must be continually remade (Keats 383). David's death merely unmasks a dualism of mind and matter, of the Closed World and the Infinite Universe, which his life had barely disguised.

The double ending of the novel thus signifies a change in the concepts governing Buckler's characterization of David; he shifts his ground, testing one assumption, that the will is free, in the tragic structure of the story of his life, and another, that reality is mental, in his portrait of the defeated Idealist of the Epilogue. The mode of representation alters as well, the mimetic mode of the main narrative giving way to the expressive method of the Epilogue. But we cannot summarily describe *The Mountain and the Valley* as a transition from a classical theory of art to romantic expressiveness by which the mirror becomes a lamp, as in M.H. Abrams's well-known formulation: "the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself" (23). The themes and images developing the story of David's early years are Romantic by definition, and state a Wordsworthian belief in both the imaginative and affective stores of happy childhood and the reciprocity of man and nature, iconically represented by the living, breathing Christmas tree of hope as an aesthetic of organic unity. The adult David's experience in the Epilogue, like that of a second generation British Romantic poet, deconstructs this earlier ideology of teleological purpose. The brook where he stoops to drink, for example, reflects his face

but he does not remark his reflection: this variant of a *Shelleyan* motif implies that the self might still find itself in nature in the Wordsworthian way, were it to look beyond its self-absorption, yet this reflection is at the same time both unstable and illusory — it wobbles and disintegrates. The log road, while it leads to the promised (Freudian) end, also disappoints in the various ways I have discussed, so that these negative suspensions become the signs of Buckler's Modernism.

The novel represents Buckler's cathartic attempt to recuperate his losses, overcoming guilt and alienation and regaining access to springs of feeling that might have grown dry with the passage of time. Unlike Wordsworth in his "Immortality Ode," Buckler finds little consolation in the "years that bring the philosophic mind" or at least none in the philosophies available to him (Wordsworth 460).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed the concept of the double ending and the method of arguing from the end from David Gallop's "Can Fiction Be Stranger Than Truth? An Aristotelian Answer," *Philosophy and Literature* 15 (1991): 1-18. Until recently, most studies of *The Mountain and the Valley* have depended for their interpretation on the one ending of the Epilogue.

<sup>2</sup> Buckler had an MA in Philosophy and had written on either Aristotle's psychology of character (Bissell, *Ernest* 37) or his theory of conduct (Orange 2), so it is not unreasonable to suppose that he would have been familiar with Aristotle's literary criticism. I have not been able to consult the manuscript collection in the Buckler archives at the University of Toronto to verify the scope of his philosophical work on Aristotle.

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