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Article abstract

If, in Jonathan Bate's view, literary critics would be well served by turning their attentions to a "historical tradition of ecological consciousness," one obvious starting point for critics of Canadian drama is with the writings of Herman Voaden. Voaden is well known to Canadian theatre scholars as a playwright and director who drew his creative inspiration from the "natural" world, and who, in the 1920s and 30s, viewed what he perceived as the Canadian wilderness as a crucial factor in the shaping of settler identity. Incorporating Bate's advice, and drawing on insights from Northrop Frye, Val Plumwood, Christopher Manes, and Akira Lippit, this ecocritical study shows how an ecological consciousness came to the fore in Voaden's writings and how, in his play *Murder Pattern*, he brings this to its most fully developed form, portraying elements in the more-than-human physical world, not as the ground for human action, but as actions in their own right: sublime agencies that measure human lives vis-a-vis the frailty of mortal desires.

Herman Voaden's *Romantic Ecology*: Settler Identity and the Canadian Sublime

NELSON GRAY

IN *ROMANTIC ECOLOGY*, Jonathan Bate's landmark ecocritical reading of Ruskin and Wordsworth, the author proposes that critics might play a salutary role by considering literary works as the source for a "historical tradition of ecological consciousness" (9). Within the context of Canadian drama, one way to begin such an undertaking is through a re-evaluation of Herman Voaden's writings. Voaden's contributions as a playwright, director, and producer have been assessed by a number of theatre scholars,¹ but — given his singular preoccupation with Canada's "natural" environment — an ecocritical reading of his work seems both apt and long overdue. In a comment on his own writing for the stage, Voaden professed "an intense and idealized love of nature" as one of his primary themes (*Vision* 74), and, like the Canadian plays that he helped to publish and produce in the early twentieth century, nearly all of his writings are concerned with issues of settler identity vis-à-vis what he conceived of as a distinctly Canadian (that is, wilderness²) environment. Romantic nationalism was prevalent in Canada in the years when Voaden was active as a playwright, and, as Scott Watson has argued, some of these nationalist sentiments promoted a dangerously exclusionary vision of the country.³ Voaden's romantic nationalism, however, stemmed not from an ideal of racial purity but from a self-professed pantheism. What an ecocritical reading of his plays makes clear, therefore, is how this particular brand of romantic nationalism gave rise to what is, in effect, an ecocentric view of Canada, one in which human actions coexist with and are significantly thrown into relief by what he perceived as sublime agencies in the more-than-human physical world.

For Voaden, the "natural" world, in addition to being the fount of his creative inspiration and the touchstone for what he perceived as a distinct national identity, was the foundation for his spiritual beliefs. In a 16 December 1932 article for the *Sarnia Observer*, after describing how a production of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* at Bayreuth had "impressed

itself on [his] mind indelibly,” Voaden explains how, three years later, he discovered both the inspiration and the form for his play *Earth Song* via his notion of a harmonious relationship between man and nature:

I spent many long days rambling over New England hills, walking from morning till dark. These were very happy days. I began to feel that the secret of content and greatness lay in being very much in harmony with nature — in harmony with the movement of the seasons and the cycles of the days. So I wrote the play in five cycles of light and growth — each cycle consisting of four scenes — spring dawn, summer noon, autumn sunset, winter night. (5)

Moreover, as Voaden goes on to explain, this “harmony” that he experienced in nature, in addition to providing him with a template for his play’s dramatic structure, was the means by which his two archetypal protagonists, Adam and Eve, arrived at a state of “perfection” and “completion”: “Through these cycles my two characters, whom I have called Adam and Eve because they represent the promise of life in a new world, move through experiences which finally lead to the perfection of their own characters and their completion in each other. This final consummation I have called symbolically, their godhood” (5). Having been “indelibly” influenced by the dramatic personae of Brünhilde and Siegfried in Wagner’s opera, Voaden apparently wanted to create his own heroic protagonists, characters whose “godhood” would stem from an intense identification with the natural world.

What Voaden describes as “godhood” in 1932 is difficult to parse, but in *A Vision of Canada*, Anton Wagner’s 1993 collection of this author’s dramatic writings, a much older Voaden is more explicit about his spiritual beliefs at the time: “I believed that we ‘touch eternity’ by living a life in which our spirit and ‘god-soul’ become part of the rhythm and loveliness of earth. Our lives go on then, despite death. . . . Readers may be uneasy with an expression like the ‘god-soul. I believed that man was a fragment of God. I was deeply influenced by Whitman’s pantheism” (314). Voaden’s “intense and idealized love of nature,” in other words, was rooted in a Whitmanesque belief in the physical world of nature as the source of immortality. “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,” writes Whitman in “A Song of Myself,” expressing his faith in a self united, after death, with the natural world (l. 339). “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,” he asserts,

“and if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it” (ll. 126-27).

Noteworthy about Voaden’s plays, however, is that — unlike Whitman’s ebullient affirmations of the natural world as a vision of immortality — the natural environment that the characters in Voaden’s plays encounter is more likely, at least initially, to evoke mortal fears than assurances of eternal life. According to Northrop Frye, such fears were not uncommon among Canada’s settler populations and were particular, in some respects, to the way in which a latter-day romantic sensibility struggled to take hold in this country. Frye, in his “Conclusion to the First Edition of *The Literary History of Canada*,” points out that a hostile physical environment — one that he describes as “terrifying, cold, empty and vast” — makes frequent appearances in the Canadian poetry of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century (365). He notes, for instance, in the narrative poems from this era, “the recurrence of such episodes as shipwreck[s], Indian massacres, human sacrifices, lumbermen mangled in log-jams, mountain climbers crippled on glaciers, animals screaming in traps, the agonies of starvation and solitude” (365-66). As writers such as Carolyn Merchant and Val Plumwood have observed, European colonizers of the “New World,” having left behind environmental devastation in their own countries, had already been imbued with attitudes that promoted subduing the natural environment rather than identifying with it.⁴ Frye’s point, however, is that identification with nature would have been additionally problematic for Canadian poets, in part because of the country’s inclement climate and frequently hazardous terrain, and in part because of an increasingly Darwinian view of the non-human physical world as a “nature red in tooth and claw” (365). In Frye’s view, then, poetic encounters with the natural world, rather than providing a vehicle for transcendent, metaphysical experiences, more often led writers into fearful confrontations with their own mortality. “I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry,” Frye writes, “by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature. . . . It is not a terror of the dangers of discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest” (350).

Although Frye’s observations about “a terror of the soul” in regard to nature run counter to Voaden’s professions of faith in a Whitmanesque pantheism, the dramatic tension in many of Voaden’s plays stems directly from the mortal fears of characters who interact with a more-than-

human natural world that is anything but comforting. In nearly all of his dramatic work, in fact, his characters' spiritual (and nationalist) beliefs are called into question and tested by the challenges of dwelling in a formidable physical environment. Yet in almost every case, these same characters also manage heroically to assert identification with the very elements that threaten them, and it is through such challenging identifications that they come to inhabit their natural environments in ways that grant them what is, in effect, a hard-won sense of belonging.

One early example of this identification with a harsh and unforgiving natural world occurs in *Northern Song*, an unproduced work, written in 1930, that explores the fear of becoming lost in the Canadian wilderness. Much of the action in *Northern Song* involves an interchange between Don, a young man with artistic sensibilities, and Joe, a wilderness guide, when a third man — a painter named Keith — goes off into the bush and, at nightfall, fails to return. For Don, the woods are unfamiliar, and he is unnerved by fears about his friend's fate. The next morning, however, Keith walks out of the bush unperturbed, explaining that his desire to give expression to the vitality of the wilderness scene that he was painting led him to make a home of where he was for the night (110-11).

The opposition between Don's fearfulness in the bush and Keith's appreciation of it as a habitable dwelling has parallels with a story that Frye tells about an ethnologist friend and an "Eskimo" (sic) caught out in a blizzard in northern Canada. According to Frye, when the terrified ethnologist cried out, "We're lost!" his native companion offered a calming corrective: "We're not lost," he explained: "We're right here" ("Haunted" 476). For Frye, this story epitomized the estrangement that settlers and many of their descendants experienced in an environment that, for Indigenous peoples, was unequivocally a home. In *Northern Song*, however, the painter Keith, in his remarks to his wilderness guide, conveys his admiration for the rough, wild beauty of Canada: "You see, Joe, this is different country from Europe. It's wilder and rougher. You can't paint it in the old soft beautiful way. The sunlight and shadows are clear. There is no mist. Everything is rough and strong" (101). "People don't belong here as yet," Keith explains (neglecting, in his ethnocentrism, any mention of Indigenous peoples), yet his affirmation of his place in the Canadian wilderness makes it apparent that, for him at least, this part of the "New World" is beginning to feel like home. "I've

grown used to it now,” he tells the others. “You can’t roam in the North as much as I have in the last three years without learning how to take care of yourself” (111).

In Voaden’s *Wilderness*, a work that had its 1931 première at Yale University, the playwright continued to explore how characters might learn to identify with a potentially threatening natural environment. For Mary, the young school teacher in *Wilderness*, however, the challenges are much more daunting than those that the youthful Don encounters in *Northern Song*. Whereas, in the latter, Don is relieved to find that his companion has survived his night in the bush, in *Wilderness* Mary receives the dreadful news that her fiancé, Blake, has frozen to death in a blizzard.

For Blake’s widowed mother, Ellen, the death of her son is a psychological wound from which she cannot recover. By contrast, Mary proves remarkably resilient. After choking down the news of Blake’s demise, she transforms her grief into an affirmation of her fiancé’s love of the wilderness, vowing to devote herself to the physical world into which, as she sees it, her beloved’s body has now been transfigured: “I too shall hear the wilderness calling, calling my life into a great adventure. It will be my land. I’ll belong to it. I’ll be part of its winds and woods and rocks — part of its Northern Lights (*Pause*) though he’s gone now he’ll still be part of it. He’ll still belong. And he’ll be content” (179). Mary’s affirmation here is Whitmanesque in terms of her confrontation with death via an enthusiastic identification with the natural world, and for Voaden the fearlessness of such a stance was a distinctly Canadian attribute, instilled in settlers by their relationship with a relentlessly demanding environment. Also inherent in Mary’s heroic (albeit melodramatic) soliloquy, however, is the seed of an ecocentric idea — the notion that to identify with nature requires accepting one’s embodied existence as part of a physical world of other agencies, a world of “winds and woods and rocks” from which all organisms emerge and to which they must ultimately return.

Voaden’s commitment to this idea of our immanence in nature (and to a belief in nature’s divinity) shows up in nearly all of his dramatic writings and almost always via protagonists who, like Mary, confront Frye’s “deep terror in regard to nature” yet (eventually) overcome it in proclamations of praise for the more-than-human physical world. In several of Voaden’s later, less naturalistic plays — in an interdisciplinary

style that Voaden called symphonic expressionism — choreography, music, scenic elements, and light were designed to heighten the conflicts of emblematic characters whose daunting physical surroundings prove to be a source of strength and inspiration.

In *Earth Song*, for instance, an early version of Voaden's symphonic expressionist style, the struggles of two archetypal protagonists, Adam and Eve, eventually give way to declarations of rapture in which they assert their love for one another and for the earth:

EVE. We shall be one with earth and each other.

ADAM. This is the hour of consecration. In communion we shall fulfil the earth-life within us.

EVE. In the ecstasy of awakening earth we shall be complete together. (257)

Something similar (though expressed in a less bombastic manner) occurs in *Hill-Land*, Voaden's next foray into symphonic expressionism, a work produced and directed by Voaden in 1934 at the Central High School of Commerce in Toronto. In the conclusion to *Hill-Land*, a young man named Paul, having lost his father and young brother to the vicissitudes of a hazardous environment, faces up to the death of his grandmother in a manner that calls to mind Mary's response to loss in *Wilderness*: "I shall walk over the earth which gave her strength, and I shall meet her there. I shall climb the hill, where Rachel and I loved each other, and I shall meet her there. . . . All these years she has been part of the hills and the sky. Now she is everywhere, and indestructible" (312). Like Mary's response to the death of her fiancé, Paul's courage stems, once again, from an identification with an environment that has tested his resolve but, in the process, made it all the stronger.

Although identification with nature is also a central theme in *Murder Pattern* (1936), in this play — arguably Voaden's most ecocentric work — the ebullience spouted by characters such as Mary in *Wilderness*, Adam and Eve in *Earth Song*, and Paul in *Hill-Land* has been replaced with a less optimistic, more solemn vision of human existence. Whereas Voaden's earlier work celebrates the endurance of the human spirit in a heroic, Whitmanesque (at times almost Wagnerian) manner, *Murder Pattern* — by personifying the natural world as a dramatic character — conveys a more tragic, post-humanist sensibility, placing emphasis on the limits of the human and depicting what it might mean to situate

our lives within a more-than-human physical world that extends beyond our ability to understand it.

Murder Pattern was not the first time that Voaden had explored the possibilities of personifying non-human physical forces in a performance script. He had done so to some extent in *Symphony* (1930), an unproduced collaboration with the painter Lowrie Warrener. In this work, the protagonist is an Everyman character whose struggles unfold amid non-human natural forces such as trees, wind, grains of wheat, clouds, heat from the sun, and so on. The script for *Symphony*, however, is not a play per se but a scenario for an expressionist dance piece.

Warrener and Voaden's decision to make *Symphony* a movement-and-image-based work contributed, in one respect, to its ecocentric perspective by ensuring that all of its "characters," whether human or not, would be expressed in purely physical terms. Consider, for instance, how the authors envisage a moment in the second movement of *Symphony* when an animated northern wilderness presses in upon their Everyman character, threatening to overwhelm him:

The wind comes up, the tree forms sway into more grotesque and menacing attitudes, and the whole north takes on motion. Then Man's inner imagination transforms the shapes and figures that terrorize him into huge overpowering shapes that close in upon him, soft and yielding. As he resists and rejects them they change into other shapes and move and writhe about him. They rush against him and appear to smother him, then scatter for a new attack upon the senses. (42)

In this passage, the human protagonist clearly has a central role in the action, yet, in the midst of all these movements and shapes, the lines of distinction between what is human and what is not begin to blur. Moreover, in the script for *Symphony*, it is not only in moments of terror that such blurring takes place. In the conclusion to this second movement, for instance, at the moment when "Man" has overcome his fears and is ostensibly more at home in the wilderness, the authors, in homage to the Group of Seven,⁵ depict him as if he has become one with his environment: "For a moment he stands at the summit, regarding the scene before him. In its sturdiness his figure resembles one of the dark wind-blown jack pines that crown the ridge" (143). A similar image of metamorphosis occurs in the conclusion to the fifth and final movement of *Symphony*. Here the Everyman figure, after a series of profound losses,

ascends, at the end of his life, to another vantage point, and the audience is invited to contemplate a sublime vision of the north that calls to mind one of Lawren Harris's paintings of snow-peaked mountaintops: "the mountain summit, visible at last, radiant with the morning light. The music is tumultuous and triumphant. On either side of the great lifting shoulders of the summit can be seen other peaks in the distance, likewise caught in the matchless radiance of morn" (150). In a prefatory comment to *Symphony*, Voaden refers to this image as a "transfiguration" and describes it as an expression of his pantheistic beliefs: "[This] final transfiguration," he writes, "was important to me. Here was *my* religion. I was, and am, a deeply spiritual person — but in the way of St. Francis and Whitman — worshipping nature and light and the sun and trying to live Christ's humanity in my life with my fellow man" (156). For Voaden, then, it was a pantheistic vision that laid the foundation for the transformative conclusion to *Symphony*, in the image of a man who, at the end of his life, has become a mountain.

Although image and choreography — had Voaden and Warrener's scenario been produced — might have allowed the authors to portray their Everyman as a being embedded within, contained by, and ultimately at "one" with the earth, Voaden's *Murder Pattern*, a play in which the earth itself has a speaking role, conveys a more radically earth-centred stance. As Christopher Manes has observed, the domain of speech in Western culture has been conventionally conceived as specific to human beings, while all other forms of life have been generally treated as mute. In his article "Nature and Silence," he makes the point that this way of thinking, which he views as a significant contribution to our current ecological crisis, effectively privileges human beings as the only authentic "subjects" on the planet, so that all other beings become silent, passive objects. As Manes points out, "It is as if we had compressed the entire, buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology, to the point that someone like Georg Lukacs could say, 'nature is a societal category' — and actually be understood" (15).

Manes locates one of the primary sources of this human-centred thinking in the Christian tradition, in particular the forms of biblical exegesis that arose in the Middle Ages:

According to medieval commentators, eagles soared higher than any other bird and could gaze upon the sun, undazzled, because they were put on Earth to be symbols of St. John and his apoca-

lyptic vision, not the other way round. From this hermeneutical perspective, it was inconceivable that eagles should be autonomous, self-willed subjects, flying high for their own purposes without reference to some celestial intention, which generally had to do with man's redemption. (19)

This kind of exegesis, Manes explains, "swept all things into the net of divine meaning" (with the human always at the centre) and "established God as a transcendental subject speaking through natural entities, which, like words on a page, had a symbolic meaning, but no autonomous voice" (19-20).

In *Electric Animal*, critical theorist and media scholar Akira Lippit provides additional insights on the "silencing" of the natural world. Like Manes, Lippit points out how the traditional Christian worldview tended to objectify non-human animals to privilege the sovereign human subject (75). Moreover, as he goes on to explain, a tradition of Western philosophy has been equally concerned with making distinctions between humans and animals by emphasizing language and speech as the provenance of a uniquely human subjectivity:

Arguably the most sensitive arena in which human subjectivity struggles for dominance is that of language in general, and speech in particular. Most surveys of Western philosophical thought affirm (with a few very important exceptions) the consensus that although animals undoubtedly communicate with one another, only human beings convey their subjectivity in speech. That is, human speech exceeds its function as communication and actually performs, with each utterance, the subject. (14)

Lippit's study details how Western philosophers — from Aristotle to Descartes and from Hegel to Lyotard — have advanced the view of non-human animals as creatures that lack speech and therefore subjectivity, and Lippit argues that only recently, in the writings of philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida, has this idea been called into question (15-17, 127-34).

Given the observations of Manes and Lippit, Voaden's decision in *Murder Pattern* to represent the non-human world not only via image and movement but also via a speaking chorus of Earth Voices was a strikingly original move in English Canadian drama.⁶ Before *Murder Pattern*, Voaden had been exploring the dramatic possibilities of choruses in his plays and performances, but with a difference. In *Earth Song*

and *Hill-Land*, for instance, his speaking choruses serve a number of functions: sympathizing with his human protagonists, giving voice to their hopes and fears, and offering spiritual guidance. In these earlier works, however, the characters are personifications of *human* emotions and ideas: The Ecstatic Voice, The Lyric Voice, The Philosophic Voice, The Voice of Pity, and so on. New and radical about *Murder Pattern*, however, was his conception of the chorus as a verbal expression of earthly forces and the earth itself. Although the choruses in *Earth Song* and *Hill-Land* are conveyed as personifications of human psychology, Voaden's chorus of Earth Voices is more specifically grounded in the physical world of nature, and it is from this position of an imagined alterity that it speaks.

Even more remarkable in *Murder Pattern*, however, is the fact that Voaden invites his audience to imagine not only that the earth can speak as a self-reflective consciousness, but also that it can do so with more eloquence and awareness than the human characters in the action. "Pity," says the second Earth Voice, "the isolate hill folk, fearful, estranged. They have no words to speak the terror of the gloom, and the silence, and the unending distances that wall in life from life" (325). Here, then, the more conventional Western views described by Manes and Lippit have been inverted. Now it is the physical world of nature that has language, while Voaden's human characters — having no words to express the scale and "gloom" of the environing world in which they dwell — are unable to grasp the full significance of what it is saying. Indeed, a good deal of the dramatic irony in *Murder Pattern* stems directly from this juxtaposition: while the audience, via the Earth Voices, can hear and appreciate what the physical world is saying, the characters on stage remain, for the most part, unaware of its voice and, as a result, the full measure of its import and agency.

The central dramatic action in *Murder Pattern* — the story for which these Earth Voices provide commentary — is both simple and, in many respects, grim. In an isolated rural Ontario community, a man (Jack Davis) murders his brother-in-law (Steve Doan), confesses his crime, and is sentenced to death. When his sentence is then commuted to life imprisonment, he is arraigned, becomes mortally ill in jail, and, at the end of the play, returns home to face death alone. Yet it is not the dramatic narrative of *Murder Pattern* — its linear sequence of events —

that carries the import and interpretive force of this play but the variety of ways in which its action is framed.

Voaden employs several sets of characters to establish this bracketing of the action in *Murder Pattern*. Two newspaper reporters⁷ offer one perspective of the unfolding events, presenting the observable, objective details of the case via news bulletins of the murder, the trial, and the imprisonment. The following passage, for instance, provides a sample of their journalistic approach: “Friday, April 25th. The body of Steven Doan was found today, one hundred and twenty yards west of the Gore Road, near the top of the big hill. The dead man was lying on his back, in a sheltered hollow of the ground. Three bullet wounds were in his body — one through the shoulders, one in the chest, one in the stomach” (325-26). In addition to these journalistic accounts, a First Narrator and a Second Narrator provide a more omniscient view of the play’s unfolding events, describing the setting, establishing the mood, and exploring the murderer’s state of mind. At one point, after describing the details of Jack Davis’s “lonely and unhappy” marriage to Steve Doan’s sister, they depict the harsh environment and weather as factors leading to what became a source of enmity between the two men:

SECOND NARRATOR. Nine years ago he married Annie Doan, sister to Steve Doan. It was not a happy marriage. They had no friends, except the Doans.

FIRST NARRATOR. Six silent years followed after the marriage — six lonely and unhappy years. Three winters ago the fourth child was about to be born. Roads were blocked with snow, and Davis walked eight miles to the village. When finally the doctor broke through with his team it was too late. Mother and child were dead. Then the feud began. (329)

A third view of the action in *Murder Pattern* comes via the farmers in the settlement. In brief, terse exchanges, these rural characters speculate about the identity of the murderer and offer a range of opinions about the crime and about the actions taken by the authorities. One such exchange provides the following portrait of the murder victim, a man rumoured, for the most part, to have been a lazy misfit and a bully:

FIRST FARMER. Everybody says it was him burned Jim’s sugar camp early this spring, and shot Butcher’s colt last fall.

SECOND FARMER. He was that aggravatin' and sarcastic, everyone was against him. He was lazy. He wouldn't work. Then he'd have nothin' and he'd go out and take it from some one. You couldn't leave anything around in the woods but what it'd be gone. (326)

For Voaden, though, it was not enough to have all of these human characters commenting on the action, presenting facts and documentary details, providing psychological motivation, and offering ethical judgments; for him, the *place* itself had to speak.

Why? What does this earth chorus provide that his human narrators and characters cannot? Many of the functions that the Earth Voices serve are similar, after all, to those supplied by the First and Second Narrators. Like them, they comment on the isolation of the community; like them, they delve into the psychological state of the murderer and explore the motivations for his crime. Despite these similarities, however, the perspective provided by the Earth Voices distinguishes itself from that of the human narrators in two significant ways. The first results from their portrayal of the non-human natural world as an ongoing agency, independent of mortal human concerns;⁸ the second stems from their depiction of human existence as part of this agency and as that which continues to partake of it, even after death.

In keeping with their anthropocentric concerns, the First and Second (human) Narrators portray the non-human natural world, for the most part, in terms of how it affects the lives of the settlers who inhabit it. The start of the play provides a typical example:

SECOND NARRATOR: (*After three drum beats, the first on a bass drum.*) The neighbourhood is of mountainous roughness. The bush lies close up to the little farms. The first settlers made clearings along the road, and in the woods. But the soil, which gave promise of richness and fertility, proved to be shallow and stony. The winters were long, spring came late, and the frost early. Years passed. One by one, they gave up the struggle and moved elsewhere. Here and there the clearings were deserted, the houses ghost-like and silent. (323)

From the perspective of these human narrators, then, the natural environment is the “setting,” backdrop, or scenery for the action of the play, the “ground” on which the human actors conduct their affairs.

Quite another view of the natural world, however, is provided by the Earth Voices. Here environmental forces are portrayed without reference to human actions and human goals. Instead, these forces themselves are the “actors,” and they move, relentlessly, in their own time and for their own sake:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. All the while, the deep lakes moved
 their waters slowly towards the river and the sea, catching the
 myriad moods of wind and sun and cloud, through spring
 and summer and autumn and winter: through countless days
 and nights, through breathless dawns and tender twilights.
 (323-25)

Significant here is that the Earth Voices acknowledge the non-human physical world in a way that the human narrators and characters — preoccupied with ethical and social issues surrounding the murder and trial — never appear to comprehend. Conveyed as processes that take place throughout the seasons and over “countless days,” such geophysical actions transform the natural world from a static backdrop into ongoing forces that envelop human affairs. Sometimes it is the agency of the sun that the Earth Voices describe: “All day long the sun has poured its warmth into the earth. All day long the soiled snow has melted in the hollows, and the water has washed over the roads, in noisy streams” (325). At other times, it is the agency of the moon, the way in which it “whitens the farms, and silvers the quiet mirrors of the lake” (325). In November, it is the “despotic fury of the wind and the rain” (337), while in spring “the dun earth warms to the curious sun” (338). Revealingly, when Davis is wasting away in prison, the Earth Voices convey biological processes outside his jail cell that are independent of his suffering rather than emblems of it: “Spring passes, and warm rich summer drowns in the Lakeland. The trilliums are withered in the sheltered glades, and in the pasture fields the wild strawberries have borne their fruit” (339). The contrast, in other words, between what is going on with Davis and what is occurring outside his cell could not be more striking. He is dying; the natural world continues to thrive.

Having looked at the contrast between how the human narrators view the more-than-human physical world and how the Earth Voices do, what remains is to consider how these two sets of narrators view the human action in the play. Like the two parallel yet contrasting views of

the physical environment in *Murder Pattern*, there are also two distinct views of human existence. The human narrators view the settlers in this rural community from a perspective informed, it seems, by Darwinian and Freudian notions. For them, the settlers are characters that, as a result of their isolation from civilization, have begun to devolve and regress: “FIRST NARRATOR. Shut off from the world to the south, life stood still. There was no fresh blood. Here and there, in the great solitude, life moved backwards, towards the animal, the grotesque, the warped and evil” (323). This passage, then, is a view of human identity as something determined by forces from both within and without: by genetics, by environment, by repressed drives and murderous instincts. From such a perspective, evil is not some absolute force in the universe but contingent on circumstances. As a result, when the First and Second Narrators turn their attentions to the murderer, they ask the audience not to judge the evil in him but to see how this individual fits into a naturalistic “pattern” of psychology and environment: “FIRST NARRATOR. Consider this man. (*DAVIS is staring out to the audience*) An ordinary farmer of the north? No! A true subject to fit into our pattern. For loneliness has had its way with him — loneliness and terror in the midst of magnificence” (329).

Having objectified Davis in this way, the First and Second Narrators, along with the two newspaper reporters and the farmers in the area, provide a picture of the circumstances that led to his crime: a poor upbringing, an unhappy marriage, loneliness, the death of his wife and child, and the brooding accusations of in-laws who blame him for these deaths. Had Voaden restricted the audience’s view of Davis to this perspective, *Murder Pattern* might well have been a naturalistic play in the classic Zola mode, revealing how Davis, like the harried Woyceck in Georg Büchner’s play, was driven by circumstances to commit his crime. The dramatic effect of *Murder Pattern*, though, does not stem entirely from the kind of social, class, and psychological analysis that informs Büchner’s *Woyceck* and the naturalist plays of late-nineteenth-century European writers such as Strindberg and Ibsen. Instead, what distinguishes *Murder Pattern* is the way in which the human social realm, with its ethical, psychological, and juridical elements, fits into a larger “pattern,” a cosmology made evident and given expression by the non-human narrators.

From the perspective of the First and Second Narrators in *Murder*

Pattern, the import of Davis's sorrowful existence — his loneliness, his crime, and his sentencing — is viewed primarily in terms of how it is shaped by and how it affects the social community. Accordingly, the audience is given to understand how Davis came to commit murder and how, for the sake of the *polis*, he must, Oedipus-like, become an outcast. In contrast, the commentary by the Earth Voices remains entirely removed from such political and juridical concerns. As an expression of what Voaden called the “wider margins” (*Vision* 74), their views of the murdered man and of the murderer have little to do with issues of ethics and justice. Instead, they offer the audience a view of these men in terms of their relationship to the physical cosmos, and, in the process, Davis and Doan begin to look less like individuals with specific psychological and ethical profiles and more like forces of nature, similar in kind to the mute protagonist in Voaden and Warrener's *Symphony*.

The way in which the Earth Voices portray Doan, for instance, provides no moral account of his character — no indication, that is, of how he treated his neighbours or whether he merited his demise. Instead, they observe him solely as a physical entity, something akin to the rushing waters of a stream or the outspread branches of an oak tree: “Steven Doan tramped the woods and strode the north roads. He was a giant. He feared no man. His strength was the strength of three. Tonight you shall not call him to his tramping and striding. Tonight his giant strength is spent” (327-28). This description of Doan as a kind of Promethean force of nature does not, to be sure, override the community's view of him as a lazy and dangerous troublemaker, but it does provide another perspective, one that bestows a measure of respect on the murdered man as a living organism, part and parcel of the physical world.

A similar effect is achieved by how the Earth Voices depict the murderer, Jack Davis. Their portrayal of Davis does not emerge in the first two-thirds of the play, in which the action is primarily concerned with the social and ethical consequences of the murder. With his imprisonment, however, the First and Second Narrators are silenced, and the Earth Voices take over much of the commentary, providing a view of the prisoner not in terms of his crime but in terms of his mortality, and it is this much different view of Davis that brings the action of the play to a close.

The last five pages of the script accomplish this movement in the

form of an elaborate dramatic conceit that is, in effect, a kind of inverted apostrophe. In poems such as John Donne's "To the Sun Rising," Keats's "Bright Star," and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," poets address forces in nature as if they were animate, intelligent beings. In *Murder Pattern*, this convention is reversed. Here the non-human world of nature delivers a poetic address to Davis as if he were part of an animate earth.

The Earth Voices begin this inverted apostrophe by sympathizing, like the choruses in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, with the imprisoned man's abject loneliness and his growing apprehension that his sad and desperate life will soon come to an end. In the prisoner's first moments behind bars, the Earth Voices speak to Davis through the wind, the rain, and the darkness of night — elements that inform and intermingle with his own thoughts, confirming his fate and inviting him to accept the stark inevitability of his life sentence:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. Listen, O prisoner, to the despotism
fury of the wind and the rain. Listen to the wind, tortured,
ceaselessly strident. Through your thoughts the rain beats steadily,
incessantly, speaking its message of bitter finality.

FIRST EARTH VOICE. The night comes, dark and disastrous.
For you too, O soul, it is the end. The doors are closed to hope.
It is the end. (337)

Although these voices announce that Davis will never return to his former freedom, they also encourage him to overcome his fears by identifying with the circumambient physical world. "Do not despair," the Second Earth Voice counsels the prisoner: "You have yet the gift of life. The earth is not dismayed. It listens and is quiet, keeping its own secret. You, too, must not fear. You must believe and wait" (337). By directly addressing Davis in this way, the Earth Voices take on a more interventionist role in the play, becoming, in a sense, his mentors and spiritual guides. And, while he does not directly respond to them, there are indications that, by attending to processes in the natural world, he "listens" to the message of consolation and community that they bring to him:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. He sees the measureless skies arch to
the circling hills.

FIRST EARTH VOICE. He watches the clouds drift over the hills,
shadowing the sapphire lakes, and the waving forest of colour,

and the great rocks rounded and moss-grown, that stare at the sky. (341)

Davis's loneliness, in other words, is thrown into relief by the sublime grandeur of the world outside his cell and by his likeness to non-human agencies in this world — the rocks that, like him, “stare at the sky.”

Toward the close of *Murder Pattern*, with the dramatic focus shifted from Davis's life in prison to his impending death, his identity as a criminal outcast is less of a concern, and the life of this sorrowful man — imprisoned by fear and loneliness in a world that he does not understand — begins to take on significance as a paradigm for human suffering. “Inexorable is man's fate,” the Earth Voices proclaim, sounding more and more like a chorus from an ancient Greek tragedy: “Bitter his course, through life's dark maze” (338). From the perspective of these physical agencies that do not die, all humans are, in their mortality, abject beings, but to mitigate this suffering the Earth Voices offer a post-human world, inviting Davis, and by implication the audience, to reflect on his (and their) significance as an integral part of this imagined alterity.

Davis has a chance to experience this post-human world when, having become mortally ill, he is released from prison to spend his last days in his “lake-land” home. The warden assures him that there will be “folks” there who will be happy to see him, but the conditions of his release do not allow them to contact him. Instead, what welcomes Davis is the land, offering him “warmth and strength” and — significantly enough given Voaden's pantheism — “rapture”:

SECOND EARTH VOICE. Come back to the clear sunlight of
the lake-land, to the rapture of the giant-lifted skies.

FIRST EARTH VOICE. You shall hear the white clouds sing, as
they drift the soundless arch of heaven. You shall hear the wind,
blowing in sunlight. (339)

The natural world, in other words, while making life difficult for Davis (and the other settlers of this apparently desolate land), also has a more favourable aspect. Indeed, by the end of *Murder Pattern*, the elemental forces that, via the snow-blocked roads, deprived Davis of his wife and child and drove him into isolation, have become the vehicle for his redemption, a way for him to move beyond his suffering and, in accordance with Voaden's pantheism, become one with the elements.

In bringing about this resolution, the Earth Voices employ language reminiscent of biblical imagery. As part of their address to Davis, one of the Earth Voices describes the lake as “a miracle of blue and white” (339). “Rejoice, o exile,” it tells him, “you have come home at last” (339). “Surely the quietness of earth possesses him now,” declaims the First Earth Voice, “Surely the peace of earth is in his heart” (341) — lines whose rhythm and diction are redolent of Psalm 23.1.6: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” As in all of Voaden’s other works, however, there is no Christian transcendence in *Murder Pattern*. His “miracle of blue and white,” for instance, is a “miracle of wave and sun,” and, when Davis returns home, the Earth Voices relate how “[h]e sees the measureless skies arch to the circling hills” (339, 341).

Whether or not this use of biblical language was conscious — an appropriation of Christianity to subvert its message of transcendence — it is entirely in keeping with Voaden’s more earth-centred, pantheist beliefs and the way in which Voaden concludes the action in *Murder Pattern*. After portraying Davis, on his deathbed, apprehending “the great rocks, rounded and moss grown, that [like him] stare at the sky,” the Earth Voices go on to describe how non-human nature pays its respects to his death: “The autumn woods are reverent this day” (341, 342). Then, in a final passage, they welcome Davis’s spirit into the enduring, brooding, and mysterious agency of the physical world: “You have entered the temple now at last, O lonely one. You are part of the mystery at last. Your body is one with the earth. Your dreams shall blow steadily in the eternal winds. In them your spirit shall brood and pass endlessly among the hills . . . lonely and enduring as the hills” (342). The transcendence conveyed here is decidedly less ecstatic than the kind affirmed by characters such as Mary in *Wilderness* or Paul in *Hill-Land*. Instead of a triumphant affirmation of the human spirit, the Earth Voices offer a sorrowful but compassionate view of mortality: a vision of death as a metamorphosis into an agency that endures but according to terms and processes beyond human concerns. Rather than depicting a nature that obliges human identity, *Murder Pattern* conveys how and why we might acknowledge and appreciate nature, not as a collection of resources to be extracted — what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called “a standing reserve” — but as an animated materiality in its own right.

The notion of the sublime in the Canadian wilderness has changed a great deal since the 1936 production of Voaden's *Murder Pattern*. By the latter half of the twentieth century, Canadian playwrights had already begun turning their attentions, in various ways, to the vulnerability of the natural world (see Gray). And, whereas the massive geological scale of the Canadian wilderness provided Voaden with the means to portray human actions as part and parcel of an enduring agency in the land, one is more likely, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, to encounter the sublime as a series of disturbances and disappearances in the more-than-human physical world. Lippit, for instance, has noted that animals, once "a sign of nature's abundance," now "inspire a sense of panic over earth's dwindling resources" (1), and, whether one considers the massive gyre of plastic particles in the Pacific Ocean, contemplates the scale and consequences of climate change, or views Edward Burtynsky's photographs of the toxic tailing ponds from Canada's tar sands, one is struck not by the invincibility of the natural world but by the forces of human ambition and industry that have so rapidly and profoundly intervened to alter the earth's biological processes. Yet what is engendered in such recognitions might also be appreciated as an extension of the kind of ecocentric worldview portrayed in *Murder Pattern*, for in confronting the limitations of what we can draw from the earth and its more-than-human agencies, we encounter a measure of our mortality, not only as individuals but also as a species — a post-human vision that will require equal doses of humility and compassion in the search for collective action that will support the living material world that has given rise to our fragile existence on this planet and on which our very existence continues to depend.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, the works by Grace, Leggatt, Nothof, and Wagner.

² In the preface and introduction to *Six Canadian Plays*, Voaden writes enthusiastically about "the vigorous, outdoor spirit of Canada" and pays homage to F.B. Housser's description of the Canadian north as "a rough country of rivers, waterfalls, lakes, canyons, and great hills" (viii, xviii).

³ Watson goes so far as to describe Housser's published accounts of the Group of Seven — a book that Voaden cites as one of his primary influences — as "a white supremacist tract." "Identifying the Canadian race with the wilderness and the north," Watson writes, "Housser evoked a mystique of snow and 'whiteness.' Whiteness represented the northern expanses, but it also had racial connotations" (277).

⁴ See Merchant (99-126, 193) and Plumwood (“Decolonizing Relationships” 51-78; *Feminism* 69-110).

⁵ “It was a sign of how much our friends in the Group of Seven meant to us,” Voaden writes, “that Man’s sturdy, triumphant figure resembled ‘one of the sturdy jack pines that crown the ridge’” (*Vision* 153).

⁶ For European productions that incorporate natural forces as communicative characters, see Richard Wagner’s *The Ring Cycle* and Leoš Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen*. Determining if these are ecocentric productions, however, would require some detailed analysis.

⁷ In the workshop production, according to reviewer Augustus Bridle, they were stationed “in little red-light booths on the floor of the theatre” (qtd. in Voaden, *Vision* 319).

⁸ In this respect, what the Earth Voices offer in *Murder Pattern* is similar to what the choral addresses to the gods provide in the theatre of ancient Greece: namely, a way of reflecting on human actions from the vantage point of those who do not die.

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