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GENDERED LANDSCAPES SYNERGISM OF PLACE AND PERSON IN CANADIAN PRAIRIE DRAMA

ANNE F. NOTHOF

In an attempt to realize the relationship of character and landscape, recent Canadian Prairie drama has moved beyond the confines of theatrical space through a metaphysical evocation of place and time. The prairies are configured as an imaginative projection of the human psyche, expressed through images that are themselves a reflection of an interaction of human and elemental forces. In the works of three women playwrights in particular—Gwen Pharis Ringwood's *Mirage*, Sharon Pollock's *Generations*, and Connie Gault's *Sky and The Soft Eclipse*, character has metonymic resonance: it is contiguous with place and time. The relationship with place is not confrontational but synergistic.

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Typically, the male response to prairie landscape in earlier works of fiction by Robert Stead, Frederick Philip Grove, and Sinclair Ross, has been a posture of either triumph or defeat—a paradoxical configuration of vertical *man* in a horizontal landscape.¹ Approached wholly as a masculine enterprise, the encroachment of man on the prairie environment has been defined by two things—solitude and an awareness of the surrounding emptiness: “The basic image of a single human figure amidst the vast flatness of the landscape serves to unify and describe Canadian prairie fiction” (p. ix). In his seminal essay “The Prairie: A State of Mind,” novelist and playwright Henry Kreisel similarly defines the relationship of man to the landscape as being that of an intruder: “Man, the giant-conqueror, and man, the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat, form the two polarities of the state of mind produced by the sheer physical fact of the prairies” (quoted on p. xi). Travel writer Edward McCourt also sees the relationship as paradoxical: “The Saskatchewan prairies [are] a world that persuades [man] to accept the fact of his own curious duality—that he is at once nothing and everything, at once the dust

of the earth and the God that made it.”² Struggle and conflict characterize a masculine perspective of human interaction with the land in early twentieth-century Canadian prairie fiction. In *Wolf Willow* (1955) by Wallace Stegner, the relationship is more ambivalent—both adversarial and nurturing:

Desolate? Forbidding? There was never a country that in its good moments was more beautiful. Even in drouth or dust storm or blizzard it is the reverse of monotonous, once you have submitted to it with all the senses. You don't get out of the wind, but learn to lean and squint against it. You don't escape sky and sun, but wear them in your eyeballs and on your back. You become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark.

It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones.³

This response of the “pioneer” to the land in the works of male fiction writers is perhaps as much a product of the time in which they were written as it is determined by the gender of the writers. However, the “transcendental” response of Sharon Butala in *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994) suggests that a woman's inclination is to make connections with physical landscape and to evoke a spiritual geography: “And what about the end of the day when in the wash of golden light all blemishes fade and disappear and peace descends over the yellow grasses and the luminous sky? Then, too, there is such perfection that all desire for heaven is absorbed in the glowing, fragile plains, the radiant hills.”⁴ In the plays of three Canadian women written in the last two decades, there is at least an attempt at reconciliation with landscape, even a “merging” with landscape in a mystical sense. Sharon Pollock,

Gwen Pharis Ringwood, and Connie Gault assume that character is “bred” by landscape. They dramatize the possibility and necessity of a synergistic relationship of people and environment. Their characters are survivors only insofar as they have *not* lived in opposition to the land or to each other.

In some respects, the prairie plays of these three women are expressions of their own interaction with a prairie landscape. The small prairie towns in Connie Gault's Saskatchewan are part of her personal history. Sharon Pollock has chosen to live in Calgary, Alberta, although she was born and grew up in the radically different landscape of New Brunswick, believing that “you aren't always born where you belong.”⁵ Gwen Pharis Ringwood was born in Anatome, Washington, in 1910, but in 1913 her family moved to Barons, a small town in southern Alberta, and then to Magrath. Her early plays *Still Stands the House* and *Dark Harvest*, both written in 1939 while she was studying playwriting at the University of North Carolina, are stark portraits of men and women consumed by their need to own or control the land. In *Still Stands the House*, the woman who refuses to surrender her patrimony destroys both her brother, his wife, and their unborn child. In *Dark Harvest*, the consequences of the husband, Gerth's dreams and his hubris are disastrous to himself and to his wife, Lisa:

GERTH: I had a dream once, Charlie—a dream of a great wheat field, yellow in the sun. It grew tall and filled out early. I could see it going out in box cars across the ocean to places in Spain and England, some of it ending up in China even. And I grew it. It was mine—mine! Gerth Hansen furnishing bread for the world, in spite of drought or grasshoppers, in spite of God! And Lisa was in my dream, standing there, her eyes as blue as flax in the morning, and the wheat around her. But a hail storm came up. I saw it smashing the wheat back into the earth, breaking it off at the roots, leaving it only fit to feed the birds. And I ran to where she

was, because I didn't want the hail to hurt her. I wanted to keep it away from her, but when I got there, she wasn't there any more. She'd gone.⁶

In her later works, Ringwood ameliorates this portrait of pioneer struggle to show how communities develop through a recognition of interdependence and reconciliation. In one of her last plays, *Mirage*, Ringwood views the history of three generations of a prairie family as a process—beginning with struggle and near defeat but evolving toward an awareness of how the “gods of the land” inform human life. *Mirage* was commissioned for the Learned Societies Conference at the University of Saskatchewan in 1979, which may account in part for its celebratory tone. It resembles in some respects the musical pageants that Ringwood had provided for towns such as Edson, Alberta, with its integration of chorus, music, poetry, and its epic dimensions. However, it is less a documentary than an expressionistic realization of a response to landscape. The prologue, a poem spoken by the “diviner” Dowser Ringgo which recurs as a choric refrain in the play, invokes an animate and metaphysical landscape:

A prairie vision must inform my song.
 Much that I count as beautiful or strong
 I learned here, long ago,
 Here in this central plain where my world
 began
 Stretching out wide and far
 Under the high dome of wheeling stars.

What gods I knew
 Rose in plumes of dust at high bright noon
 Or flattened themselves on the long
 shadows
 Of morning and evening on the prairie.
 Phantoms in drifting snow howled with
 the blizzard,
 Etched mandalas on the window pane
 In the stillness of late dawn when it
 seemed
 The world would crack apart with cold.

Elusive spirits rose on the breath of
 patient cattle
 Huddled against winter.
 Spirits that shimmered in mirage,
 Sailed with the high cry of wild geese
 flying,
 And moved across wheat fields in soft
 undulation.

They were no easy gods,
 Nor could they be deceived by easy
 offering.
 They hid in buffalo wallows,
 Took feather shape, drifting on air,
 Or lynx-eared padded on soft cat feet.
 Yet where they trod, the downy crocus
 pushed up through
 Snow in spring-time
 And golden rod nodded on autumn
 roadsides.

.
 No easy gods, and yet they challenge,
 crying “hunt us down,
 Uncover us from beneath your monu-
 ments of wood and stone,
 Come, dance and sing with us,
 For without us you are homeless.
 Hunt us down for without us you are
 forever homeless.”⁷

Ringwood evokes the compelling power and beauty of the prairie through the prophetic vision of the mystic and seer, Dowser: as a “choric” character, he evokes landscape and mood and places the action in a larger context of time and space; as a character participating in the events of the play, he observes and comments on the lives of three generations of one family—the Rylands—who first came to the Saskatchewan prairies in 1910. Dowser travels through time and space without any specific origins or destination: he is an ageless peddler of herbs and wisdom who haunts the periphery of the lives of the Ryland family as they evolve through the pioneer years at the beginning of the century to the present. Dowser finds their wells—the underground springs that provide the water necessary for their survival,



FIG. 1. *Mirage* by Gwen Pharis Ringwood. Greystone Theatre production, 1979. Reproduced courtesy of the Drama Department, University of Saskatoon.

in both a literal and a metaphysical sense. His divining rod provides a connection with the land and a way of apprehending a sense of its mighty resources, both in the past and for the future, if they are not abused.⁸ For example, Dowser advises the patriarchal pioneer John Ryland not to plow all of the wild prairie grass, not to overtax the soil in his ambitious drive for profit: "I hate to see that grass ploughed up. Roots can go down six feet looking for water. It's tough grass. Has to be" (506). He remembers the virgin prairie strewn with buffalo bones, another indicator of human greed. The consequence of Ryland's ignoring this advice is that there is nothing to hold the topsoil when the hot winds of the Depression blow across the land. When the Rylands are forced to leave the land temporarily in the

1930s, Dowser looks after their home and buys the bay mare from Jeannie, John's wife, who has a strong loyalty to and love for what she has made into a home despite the privations and hardship. When one of her sons is killed in World War II, Dowser comments again on the destruction wrought by humanity on the land and on other human beings: "We plough up our land until it blows away into dust. We hurl bombs on our cities until the children blow away in the dust" (530). But he also recognizes the creative potential in men and women—the "power" in the granddaughter, Laura, for example, who will explore the "underground rivers" through her creative work as an artist. It is Dowser who provides a sense of continuity for the family, and he is the first to greet the grandson, Hilt, when he returns



FIG. 2. *Mirage* by Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Greystone Theatre production, 1979. Reproduced courtesy of the Drama Department, University of Saskatoon.

to the farm. Like the prairie prophets in W. O. Mitchell's novels *Who Has Seen the Wind* and *The Kite*, Dowser is a life force in the play, connected with the underground springs and sustaining the possibility of building a community on the prairie. Like Saint Sammy in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, he is characterized by enthusiasm for life in all its forms, and by his simplicity and faith.

Dowser as a "uniquely Canadian prophet" first appears in Ringwood's play *Widger's Way* (1952), described by critic Denyse Lynde as "the mysterious pedlar, well-witcher, dreamer, buffoon . . . defined by his creative imagination and an intuitive understanding of things. He is a dreamer whose ability to see through the surface of life gives shape and focus to the existence of those around him, especially those

whose own dreams have been threatened by the prosaic texture of daily life."⁹ In earlier plays, "Dowser-like figures" perform similar functions: the musician, Sam, in *The Rainmaker* (1944) is a "protector and preserver of dreams" and Nigger John in *Stampede* (1945) is a spiritual and temporal advisor.

The characterization of Dowser also resembles in significant ways the diviner Royland in Margaret Laurence's novel *The Diviners* (1974), who provides for the narrator/protagonist an important way of connecting with the past and the future, and a means of understanding the ephemerality of her own "divining" talent—that of writing: "Royland came shuffling and crunching through the sundried grass. Old Man River. The Shaman. Diviner. Morag, always glad to see him, felt doubly glad now. He would, of course, not tell her what to do. Not Royland's way. But after a while she would find she knew."¹⁰ Not incidentally, Ringwood's *Dark Harvest* was the first Canadian play Laurence had seen, while a student at the University of Manitoba. In Laurence's foreword to *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, she identifies Dowser as a seminal character in *Mirage*: "This is a more overtly political play than most of Ringwood's later work, but it is saved from didacticism by its moving portrayal of the fierce devotion of some of these people to a frequently harsh land, and by the presence of the [sic] Dowser, a prophet-like figure whose compassion extends to three generations and whose vision recognizes and acknowledges the ancient spirits of the land."¹¹ In *Mirage* Ringwood shows how the pioneer John Ryland, whose original impulse was to fence the land—to discipline and order it for his own use—is succeeded by his son, Ryan, who learns what Dowser and the Indians always knew, that "a man doesn't own the land. The land owns him. A man just holds it, in trust."¹² Ryan Ryland also realizes that he is as much imprinted by the land as it is by him. Like the farmer in Al Purdy's poem "The Country North of Belleville," he will grow old "plowing and plowing a ten-acre field until / the

convolutions run parallel with his own brain:"¹³

I wonder why a man wants to pass on something he's worked at, toiled for . . . something of himself to the ones who come after. Hilt won't know how I feel when I plant a crop year after year, watch it grow, wait for the rain to come, hope the frost will hold off and the snow won't come till after harvest. Hilt won't know how our hearts lifted when we saw that the shelter belts were holding the soil from blowing away or how we welcomed the bluebirds and meadow larks that nested there, the ducks swimming on that pond. Hilt won't know how I feel when I hold a full golden head of wheat in my hand and see wheat standing as high as my waist around me and feel that I'm feeding people a thousand miles away. The map of this farm's inside me, Cissie, the contours, the places that need work, the clean rich fields, the ponds we built to hold water, the coulee. Those who come after won't know a man can carry a map of every acre of his farm inside himself. How could Hilt or anyone who comes new to the place know how thirty years has imprinted that place on the man who worked it?¹⁴

Ringwood also integrates the perspective of the Native people in *Mirage* through the White Calf family, whose history parallels that of the Rylands': their history obliquely or directly comments on the Rylands' assumptions and values. Jeanne White Calf, who inhabits the present, reaffirms her people's belief that the land cannot be owned: "When we owned the land we didn't have to have power . . . except the sun and the running rivers. We didn't even say we owned the land then . . . we lived on it. A person could carry what he owned on his back or on a horse. At the Sun Dance I almost wished I didn't live now . . . I wished I could have lived before [the White people came]."¹⁵ But the fact that she is named after Jeannie Ryland, who respected the values of the Native people and preserved for the future

a medicine bag she had found on the prairie, suggests the possibility of a shared, mutually beneficial life on the land, particularly since Jeannie's grandson, Hilt, is drawn to Jeanne White Calf. The play begins in the present, with their reunion at the family farm, and then moves back in time to explore the roots of their lives.

In one sense, these past lives are a kind of "mirage" which informs the present and suggests future possibilities. A "mirage" of grain elevators in the distance and the broad sweep of the prairie sky were depicted in the premiere production in May 1979 by projecting slides on a large screen that formed the backdrop to the play. According to the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* reviewer, Don Perkins, the prairie was also evoked through suggestive sound and action:

Mirage is set on a nearly-empty stage, with all cast members remaining around the margins, providing the buzzes, whistles and moaning breezes that make up the silence of the prairies. A small platform covered in weathered boards provides a stage for the three musicians. . . . With the exception of four straight-backed wooden chairs, all props are created in the minds of the audience by the miming of the actors . . . And the stage back is a large screen where slides of various people and events from history are flashed to help set the period and the mood.¹⁶

However, the prairie setting and the symbol of the mirage are more compellingly realized through the play's language. Ringwood suggests that the play itself is a form of "mirage"—an "insubstantial pageant" that will inevitably fade. But she also suggests that the spirit of optimism and courage that informed the building of communities on the Saskatchewan prairie will endure, as will the land itself. Individual lives may disappear from view, but their vision will continue to inform the present, as Dowser suggests to Hilt at the end of the play:

Hilt: Dowser . . . was that all . . . just a mirage? Like those elevators?
 Dowser: All what, Hilt?
 Hilt: All the living that was in these [medicine bags]. All those lives ploughed into this land? You know . . . hopes, plans, work, . . . everything. . . . Is it just a mirage?
 Dowser: Well, if it is, what about it? Mirage? Vision? Without it, we're just like the other animals.¹⁷

The play ends with an epilogue spoken by Dowser accompanied by music that evokes the sound of the wind, as the actors who play the members of the Ryland and White Calf families move in quietly "as if they too were a mirage."¹⁸

Epilogue

They are no easy gods,
 Who ride in the smoke of campfires
 Howl with the wind and shimmer in
 mirage
 Dancing with Northern lights, glowing in
 sundogs
 These gods who challenge us to hunt
 them down.¹⁹

The focus is on the land more than on individual characters, the land as it participates in the development of community.²⁰

Similarly, in Sharon Pollock's prairie family history *Generations*, the land is cast as a dynamic "character" in the play. In her introduction to the play, she suggests that "in a sense, THE LAND is a character revealed by the light and shadow it throws on the Nurlins' lives. It has many faces, but Old Eddy sees it most clearly when he stands in the heat of summer or dead of winter in his southern Alberta back section watching the [sun] rise, and looking right across the expanse of Saskatchewan all the way to Winnipeg."²¹ Pollock stipulates in her description of the setting that "There should be some sense of the omniscient presence and mythic propor-

tion of THE LAND in the design," but this proved to be impossible to realize on the stage for the premiere production in Canmore, Alberta, in 1980, and in the Tarragon Theatre, Toronto, in 1981, particularly in combination with a "realistic" home interior, a kitchen with "all the usual accoutrements" (610). Critic Gina Mallet sarcastically points out the inadequacy of the set in her review of the Tarragon production in the *Toronto Star*:

Pat Flood has designed the small theatre as a prairie environment, the walls covered with canvas painted as blue sky with fleecy clouds, the playing space stretching up the auditorium's steps to the entrance of the theatre.

If the idea was to evoke the sense of infinite space, forget it. Watching a couple of actors crouched on the stairs, surrounded by the audience, does not give the impression of a vast prairie but of a conversation on a crowded city fire escape.²²

Pollock indicates in the published description of the set that the passage of time during one day in the life of the Nurlin family be suggested by the change of light, from "the cold grey before dawn" to a rosy glow, then "a golden glow with the rising of the red ball of the sun," which will be supplanted by "the clearer, purer light of day" (610). As does Ringwood, however, Pollock more successfully evokes the prairie through her portrayal of character and through the "enhanced dialogue."²³ It is in the persons of Old Eddy and his grandson David that the spirit of place is realized: they are defined by the land, it has imprinted them, and they have imprinted it. Old Eddy is characterized by critic Richard Perkyns in his introduction to the play as "an essential part of the inscrutable landscape."²⁴ As an early pioneer, Old Eddy has had to "wrestle and fight" with it, and in the struggle he has lost part of his hand in a threshing machine. He has also lost a wife and a son. But although he has approached the prairie as an adversary, it has over time become an integral part of his psyche;



FIG. 3. *Generations* by Sharon Pollock, Tarragon Theatre, 1981; Photographer: Andrew Oxenham; Set Designer: Pat Flood. Reproduced courtesy of the Tarragon Theatre.

he misses nothing, taking in each day “like a dog” with a “subtle sniff of the air,” the “smallest swivel of the head taking in the environment” (614). Old Eddy sees his family, his friends, his community in terms of their relationship to the land in which he has invested his life.

His son, Alfred, has fulfilled, at first with some reluctance, Old Eddy’s expectations that he continue to farm the land, persuaded only by his devastating experience of war in the trenches of France. Alfred’s youngest son, David, has inherited the convictions of Old Eddy and assumes without any doubt that his life can be lived only in terms of the prairie. He joins his grandfather in the dark kitchen at the beginning of the play, as comfortable in the faint light before dawn as is Old Eddy, with no need for artificial light to find his way around his home. Between the two men is “a silence born of ease” (611). Although he becomes embroiled in political conflict over the price of grain and finds considerable resistance to this way of life from his girlfriend, Bonnie,

David emerges “not changed—but confirmed in what he knew already but could not articulate.”²⁵ Finally, however, forced to choose between marriage to a woman unsympathetic to farm life and his commitment to the land, he does attempt to express his symbiotic relationship with the environment:

Out *there* . . . is . . . something—I know it.
Out there . . . is a feelin’ . . . you don’t get
other places. Other places it’s hidden in all
the dinky scenery, but on the *prairies* it’s
just *there*. A *power*. . . .

. . . Sure I could do some stupid job some-
where else, but when I’m standin’ out there
. . . well . . . there’s just somethin’ ‘bout a
person standin’ there on the *prairies*, ev-
erything else stripped away. It makes things
simple. (654)

The women in *Generations* have very different views of their relationship to the land. Bonnie can see only what it takes away, the high physical and psychological costs it exacts,

and she chooses not to marry David, afraid that she will lose herself in the vast space of the prairie. She prefers a more “domestic,” orderly space. Margaret Nurlin has chosen to marry Alfred just because with him she can continue to live on the land, after her father had lost his farm during the Depression, and to participate in a project that is larger than any personal or individual endeavor could be. She challenges Bonnie’s fear of losing herself as a kind of self-absorption: “Are you so special, so fine, so wonderful, there’s nothin’ bigger worth bein’ part of? . . . Good . . . You be whole then, be complete, be self-sufficient. And you’ll be alone. And in the end, you’ll be lonely” (647). Sharon Pollock’s plays frequently depict this conflict between individual needs and the larger issues that may subsume them. As she has explained in an interview, “I have a real interest in people who are willing sacrifices. On the other hand, it can’t be a sacrifice to the person who does it.”²⁶ Margaret’s connection to the land could be interpreted as a loss of self, but the character compellingly interprets it as a fulfillment of self.

As in *Mirage*, the spirit of the land is also present in the First People: Charlie Running Dog, who at the age of eighty-one looks like some outcropping of arid land, is the first character to appear in *Generations*, standing near the remnants of the original Nurlin homestead, the “Old Place” where his people used to camp, with his back to the audience, in the “cold grey light before sunrise” (611)—a figure integral to the prairies before settlement. Like Old Eddy, he has experienced the devastating loss of a son, and like him, he is a survivor. The play begins and ends with the two “elders” as the sun rises on the prairie. Old Eddy’s last words to Charlie are, “We’re still here Charlie. Hell, we’ll always be here” (655). As critic Cynthia Zimmerman points out, “Pollock grants this pair of ancestors a mythic, archetypal dimension. Representing endurance and proud continuity, they voice the play’s optimistic conclusion.”²⁷ Like Ringwood’s “diviner,” Dowser, the mystics are

“elders” whose long experience in living informs their vision.

Pollock’s plays are never schematically simple, however. Ironically, it is through David’s impulsive actions—in protest against what he perceives as unjust government policy—that the land is threatened: he fires a section of wheat, and the blaze is stopped only by a thunderstorm, which also brings much needed water to the dry prairie. The other threat comes from his elder brother, ironically named Young Eddy, since he does not inherit his grandfather’s values, who wants to sell part of the land to finance his law career. Both young men are confronted and thwarted by Old Eddy: the acquisitive, selfish expectations of Young Eddy are denied and the land remains whole; the aggressive, self-destructive impulses of David are literally knocked out of him by his grandfather.

The prairie plays of Connie Gault are more ambivalent in their conclusions. There are no celebrations or triumphs but a subtle recognition and acceptance of the stark contrast of light and shadow that characterizes prairie life. In *Sky* and *The Soft Eclipse*, the conditions of the lives of women are pared down to the elemental. Human relationships may be conflicted and fraught—even destructive. The isolation of the prairie landscape may offer a respite from predation or intrusion, or it may provide the means by which a reconciliation with place and people may be achieved.

In *Sky*, which premiered in the Twenty-Fifth Street Theatre Centre, Saskatoon, in 1989 and then moved to Theatre Network in Edmonton as part of the Charlton Trail exchange project, a woman named “Old Blanche” haunts the periphery of the action, watching her past being replayed by her young self. As a pregnant teenager she has been married, as a matter of social expediency, to a young man whose mother has recently died. As in *Generations*, the set incorporates both internal and external spaces—a kitchen crowded with plain furniture, a bedroom, and a strip of garden that provides a kind of buffer between the open prairie and wide sky and the house. “At

the outside edge of the yard, stage right, is a plain metal arch, just a length of tubing formed into a narrow U and inverted. There is no fence, no path, and the arch leads nowhere."²⁸ From time to time the young Blanche comes out of the house and looks out at the prairie through this arch, which suggests both her desire for escape and freedom and her realization that there is really nowhere for her to go. According to one review of the premiere production of *Sky*, the set was not successfully realized, "an unnecessarily capacious house taking up most of the stage, the outside world reduced to scraps around the edges."²⁹ In this production the set hampered an evocation of the prairie as a vast space in which Blanche wishes to lose herself.

Blanche has been traumatized by the abusive and predatory actions of her father and has been handed over in marriage to another man who she is determined will not subject her to further abuse. Through the duration of her pregnancy she keeps him at a distance by persuading him that she will give birth to a daughter of God on Christmas Day. The only comfort Blanche has found in a world deprived of human love has been in a large stone, warmed by the sun, a big part of it underground, "just west of Seidler, out about a mile west of town, by the side of the road." As she explains to Jasper, her new husband, "At night, I'd lay my cheek against it and watch the stars. And when I died, I'd sink into the dirt and grow right into the grass" (51). When she learns that her unborn baby is dead, she looks out of the window and wonders whether there is anything more to life: "God, you'd think there must be something out there. You can't see a god-damn thing but they say there's mountains and cities, people. You just walk far enough, that's all. That way's Seidler and who'd want to go there, for God's sake? Maybe it's all just places like Seidler. And this town. So when you get right down to it, there's nothing out there at all" (78). Finally, however, when Jasper is convinced that they must have done something wrong and are being punished by the baby's death, she takes him in her arms

and rocks him like a child: the final configuration is that of a pietà. In *Sky*, the cold heaven offers no comfort, no pity; but there is still the possibility of human compassion.

In *The Soft Eclipse*—the title is taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson—the elemental prairie environment informs the ways in which the women living in a small town in 1965 interact. Their relationships are fractious and difficult, characterized by silence and miscommunication, but finally it is during an eclipse, an obliteration of daylight at noon, that accommodations are made. The prairie mystic in *The Soft Eclipse*, Mrs. Currie, is highly sensitized to the feelings and needs of others but also suffers lapses of sensitivity when she can be just as emotionally damaging as anyone else. Like Mrs. Swithin in Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts*, on which *The Soft Eclipse* was modeled, Mrs. Currie is observant, imaginative, but vague and aimless in her relations with others.³⁰ She notices the tiny details of place and time, like the dust on the caraganas and portulacas. Like Mrs. Swithin, she is preoccupied with history—how the past underlies the present—and she knows the history of everyone in the community. She is aware that even though there may appear to be nothing happening in a small prairie town, a great deal is going on: the death of a runaway husband, the abuse of a mentally disabled wife, the seduction and betrayal of a young woman, the beginning of a love affair. As Mrs. Currie observes, "You know, I woke up this morning thinking: what if the world stopped happening? But here it is, happening all over the place. Burgeoning. Goodness. Almost wild."³¹ For Mrs. Currie, as for Mrs. Swithin, everything is mixed—the light and the darkness, the happiness and the despair. Occasionally the fragments come together into some kind of unity or harmony since everyone is mixed up with everyone else, just as everyone is an integral part of the environment which they inhabit. During an eclipse, which for Mrs. Currie disarranges the atoms from their customary patterns, the predominantly male perspective suggested by the sun is obliterated by the

shadow of the female moon³² and new insights may be achieved:

It was—exhilarating. Like shouting “No” (Pause) or “Yes.” We can do that at least. Say yes or no. Can’t we? We came together. That’s the thing. Just that we came together. Once. All of us. Not Alison. (Pause) I’ll have a talk with her tomorrow. I’ll tell her . . . something. Really, it was just what I expected. Darker. I didn’t think it would be so dark. But I was expecting it. It just shows, a person— Maybe it’s right to feel you’re kneeling. A person’s so . . . small. All this questioning. Fighting. Yes to this, no to that. It’s a lesson. We could accept the way things are. Surrender. Submit. Kneel down. (She kneels, bows her head, closes her eyes and remains silent a few moments.) I do feel strange. Almost as if I’ve lost my skin and my atoms are mingling with the rest of the world. (She raises her head, opens her eyes, looks around.) Come back, you little beggars, there’s almost nothing left of me. (77-78)

Mrs. Currie experiences a kind of transformation in which she apprehends the synergy of self and landscape.

In *The Soft Eclipse* the prairie is not characterized as in *Generations* or *Mirage*, but it is suggested or assumed. The perspectives of Mrs. Currie and of Blanche in *Sky* could only be achieved through an imaginative evocation of space. In the premiere production of *The Soft Eclipse* at the Globe Theatre in Regina, 1989, the prairie was realized by designer Jo Dibb in symbolic terms, evoking the simultaneous feelings of enclosure and of radiating space suggested by the text of the play. A boardwalk was constructed as a circle in a square playing space, with planking that radiated out from the center to suggest the continuity of the lives in the community, and the images of sun and moon. The center of the circle was filled with white sand to suggest the arid landscape and the surface of the moon. Mrs. Currie’s house was indicated by a few

planks for a table in one corner, on the opposite corner was the suggestion of a general store, a few branches of the caragana hedge were on another, and the territory inhabited by Billy, the aggressively virile young male in the play, was placed in the fourth corner. With the exception of the leaves on the hedge, no attempt at realistic depiction of set was attempted. Effects of space, heat, and the final eclipse were realized by lighting, and the circle of sand was lit from above in a blue-white light. The setting, according to director D. D. Kugler, was appropriate to the expressionist qualities of the play.³³ The prairie was critical to the mentality that would create the play, and the play was an expression of that mentality. Kugler believes that such prairie plays are surreal in their vision: there is no nostalgia, no romanticization, but an acute awareness of the stark contrasts of the prairie landscape, the sudden shifts in light, color, moods, and seasons. There is also an awareness of the interconnectedness of place and person, the synergism of landscape and character. The metaphorical configuration of women on the prairies in *The Soft Eclipse* and in *Mirage* is that of kneeling, in contrast to the vertical man of earlier prairie fiction. Their posture is one of reverent humility and awe, not one of self-assertion or dominance.

NOTES

1. Laurence Ricou has analyzed this dichotomy in *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973). Further citations to *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* are given in parentheses in the text.

2. Edward McCourt, *Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 224.

3. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), p. 8.

4. Sharon Butala, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 1995), p. 190.

5. Suzanne Zwarun, “The Cats Came Back,” *Western Living* (September 1990): 31-33, quote at p. 32.

6. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, *Dark Harvest*, in *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood*, ed. Enid

Delgatty Rutland (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1982), p. 110.

7. Ringwood, *Mirage*, *Ibid.*, p. 490. Further citations to *Mirage* are given in parentheses in the text.

8. In respect to his connection to the underground springs of the land, Dowser resembles Alexandra Bergson in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*: "Alexandra's personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow under her own fields." However, in *O Pioneers!* the early struggle of the pioneers to achieve a sense of permanency on the plains seems hopeless: "The record of the plough was . . . like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the marking of a glaciers, and not a record of human strivings" (*O Pioneers!* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962]).

9. Denyse Lynde, "The Dowser Character in the Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood," *Ariel* 18, no. 1 (January 1987): 27-37, quote on p. 27.

10. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1979), p. 286. My thanks to Professor Frances W. Kaye, who pointed out this important correspondence following my presentation of the original version of this essay at the Center for Great Plains symposium "Literatures of the Great Plains" at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in April 1997.

11. Laurence, foreword to *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood* (note 6 above), p. xiv.

12. Ringwood, *Mirage* (note 7 above), p. 543.

13. Al Purdy, "The Country North of Belleville," in *The Harbrace Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Jon Stott, Raymond Jones, and Rick Bowers (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 552.

14. Ringwood, *Mirage* (note 7 above), p. 544.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 493.

16. Don Perkins, "Mirage Opens at Greystone," *Star Phoenix*, 25 May 1979, 37.

17. Ringwood, *Mirage* (note 7 above), p. 547.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 548.

20. Geraldine Anthony, *Gwen Pharis Ringwood* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), p. 111.

21. Sharon Pollock, *Generations in Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre*, ed. Richard Perkyns (Toronto: Irwin, 1984), p. 609. Further citations to *Generations* are given in parentheses in the text.

22. Gina Mallet, review of *Generations* by Sharon Pollock [*Toronto Star*], in *Modern Canadian Drama and the Critics* (rev. ed.), ed. L. W. Conolly (Vancouver: Talon books, 1995), p. 274.

23. Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much, *Fair Play: 12 Women Speak: Conversations with Playwrights* (Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1990), p. 210.

24. Richard Perkyns, introduction to *Generations* (note 21 above), p. 605.

25. Robert Nunn, "Sharon Pollock's Plays: A Review Article," *Theatre History in Canada* 5 (Spring 1984): 72-83.

26. Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman, eds., *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights* (Toronto: Coach House, 1982), p. 201.

27. Cynthia Zimmerman, *Playwriting Women: Female Voices in English Canada* (Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1994), p. 80.

28. Connie Gault, *Sky* (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1989), p. 11. Further citations to *Sky* are given in parentheses in text.

29. Marian Endicott, "Saskatchewan: SKY," *Theatrum*, April/May 1989: 44.

30. Connie Gault makes clear her indebtedness to *Between the Acts* in a panel discussion with women playwrights in Regina, 1996: "All that coming together and dispersing in *The Soft Eclipse* was highly influenced by *Between the Acts*, which is one of my favourite books. I actually set out to write a play that Virginia Woolf might have written if she had grown up in Saskatchewan" ("Women Playwrights in Regina: A Panel Discussion with Kelley Jo Burke, Connie Gault, Rachael Van Fossen, and Diane Warren," moderated, transcribed, and edited by Penny Fartan, *Canadian Theatre Review* 87 [Summer 1996]: 55-64, quote at p. 63).

31. Connie Gault, *The Soft Eclipse* (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1990), p. 14. Further citations to *The Soft Eclipse* are given in parentheses in text.

32. Diane Bessai, "Centres on the Margin: Contemporary Prairie Drama," in *Contemporary Issues in Canadian Drama*, ed. Per Brask (Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1995), p. 192.

33. D. D. Kugler, telephone conversation with author, 14 January 1997. Kugler has directed Canadian plays in Toronto, Vancouver, Regina, and Edmonton, and came to Canada from Nebraska. In a 1991 production of the play at the 25th Street Theatre's Playwrights Repertory Festival in Saskatoon, directed by Marian Endicott, the set combined expressionism and realism: "an angular and white stylized small town street gives the impression of heat and community, and props and costumes were excruciatingly accurate, down to the 7-Up bottles with mermaid logos." (Glenda MacFarlane, "25th Street Theatre's Playwrights Repertory Festival," *Theatrum* 24 [June/July/August 1991]: 35-37, quote at p. 37).