EXPERIMENTATION IN THE FICTION OF JOHN METCALF

KICKING AGAINST TRADITION:
EXPERIMENTATION IN THE FICTION OF JOHN METCALF

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INTRODUCTION

John Metcalf has been living and writing in Canada for twenty-five years. During that time he has demonstrated phenomenal energy in editing anthologies and textbooks of Canadian writing, in promoting the work of Canadian writers, in writing perceptive and provocative assessments of the Canadian literary establishment and, most importantly, in making his own significant contribution to literature in this country.

And yet... Critics of Metcalf's fiction tend to preface their examinations by noting and attempting to explain the relatively small amount of scholarly activity his works have generated. In the burgeoning industry of CanLit, this lack seems indeed remarkable. Reingard Nischik and Barry Cameron attribute it in part to Metcalf's preference for the short story, which is too often regarded by Canadian readers as a dry run for the novel, rather than a genre in its own right (Nischik, "The Short Story in Canada" 236; Cameron, "An Approximation of Poetry" 17).

Robert Lecker writes: "Another reason Metcalf's stories

have been overlooked is that they are, by contemporary standards, relatively traditional in form" (Lecker 59). This, I think, is an important point: because his stories have been perceived as "relatively traditional in form," Metcalf has remained outside, for example, the coterie of Canadian postmodernism (one which he would no doubt be loath to join but within which his work might have been granted a wider field of reception). In The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (Hutcheon explains in the introduction that "fiction" here means "novel"), Metcalf merits a one-line reference: his two novels are listed in a parenthesis in the Appendix. This despite the fact that a number of his stories comply with the definition of postmodernism Hutcheon outlines. What I intend to argue here is that Metcalf's stories are by no means exclusively traditional in form, and that many of them employ techniques generally associated with the postmodern.

In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Metcalf states: "Most critics seem to have me pegged as a very traditional writer. I'm not sure why. Stories like 'The Teeth of My Father' and 'The Eastmill Reception Centre' aren't Katherine Mansfield, exactly" (Hancock 118). Metcalf's earlier stories, which often address thematic concerns such as the loss of childhood innocence and the sudden awareness of mortality, are often structured around a Joycean epiphany and may well have

established his image as a traditionalist. In addition, the frequent opposition in his fiction between the values of contemporary North America and those of pre-war Britain, with a clear preference for the latter, suggests an ideological conservatism which may also be related to this perception. However, as Metcalf's career as a writer developed, his stories grappled more and more often with the problems of the mature artist in contemporary society and with the craft of writing itself. The epiphanies became less frequent; Metcalf's works are marked, increasingly, by a meticulous attention to and experimentation with the specifics of language and typography. "I have," he has said, "a deep and probably neurotic interest in what you might call the *calligraphic* look of words on a page" (Hancock 113).

While Metcalf's style and preoccupations changed, his reputation did not. I will quote more fully the comments of Lecker, a fragment of which is cited above:

> Another reason Metcalf's stories have been overlooked is that they are, by contemporary standards, relatively traditional in form: there is no trendiness here, no straining to impose deconstructions, no hide-and-seek metaphors, doors to labyrinths, or visionary bric-a-brac. Metcalf isn't fancy. He believes that a plot should be interesting, mysterious, and built with a dovetailed quality that will endure. He is concerned with the morality of his characters and their culture. He likes to set his stories realistically by concentrating on the details which define time and place. Most important, he is preoccupied with a well-worn theme: the relationship between art and human experience.
> (Lecker 59)

Picture it, if you will: good old un-fancy John Metcalf sitting at a desk whose dove-tailed drawers were built to last (probably by his great-grandfather), carefully crafting yet another traditional realist story about art and life. This image may be partly accurate; it is also quite false. One of the problems with literary criticism (or reading in general) is that we often form certain fixed perceptions about a writer. A story which does not match those perceptions is classified as unusual, a departure from the norm. The propensity for establishing norms is as inevitable as it is perverse: inevitable because we always feel the need of a yardstick, a basis for comparison, and perverse because it is ridiculous to suggest of two Metcalf stories that one is somehow more *like him* than another; where could the 'other' have come from if not the author himself? There are, I think, many sides to this John Metcalf; it is important not to overlook, in our search for patterns, those characteristics which do not seem to fit the mould we have cast. Metcalf's stories are not, for the most part, highly experimental fictions; I want to talk about those that are.

Cameron expresses ambivalence on the subject of Metcalf's experimentation:

> Metcalf's concern with what he calls the "*new verse forms*" of the short story -- "imagery, sound, weight, alliteration, assonance," "hints of rhyme and near repetitions," accentual stress in sentences, and the ways in which the place between speech and silence is the oral equivalent of text

> and white space in poetry-- certainly subverts the hegemony of theme, plot, and character in fiction; but Metcalf is still powerfully committed to the representational, to story. (Story, as distinct from text or discourse, refers to the events and situations evoked by a narrative text in their chronological order despite whatever temporal arrangement they might have in the plot as it is dispersed in discourse; it is the story we construct as we read.) Despite the significant metafictional dimensions of such stories as "The Teeth of My Father," "Private Parts," and "The Eastmill Reception Centre" and his awareness of the materiality of language, Metcalf is no outright admirer of postmodernism.
>
> (JM 10)

Why Metcalf's commitment to "story," which does not prevent his manipulation of discourse, should be opposed to his concern with the "*new verse forms*" of short fiction is not clear. As Cameron points out, Metcalf does not associate himself with the postmodernists and indeed claims not to understand them ("Well, I've never really grasped what post-modernism *is*.[...] The sort of stuff George [Bowering] is always nattering on about-- reflexive fiction or whatever they call it-- is like a sort of literary Rubik's Cube" [Hancock 102]). Cameron's comments illustrate the tension in Metcalf's work between what we have decided to call the "modern" and the "postmodern." Unable to divorce himself completely from either side of the opposition, Metcalf writes, as he must, from both.

Lecker divides Metcalf's stories into three principal groups. The first of these comprises initiation stories, which tend to focus on the recognition by a boy or adolescent

of one of the eternal verities. These stories, according to Lecker, are generally constructed around a brief moment of epiphany and are told from a third person point of view. Stories in the second group, also narrated in the third person, tend to present the problems of a slightly more mature figure, often an artist who struggles to justify his life from an aesthetic point of view. The final category, and that which interests me particulary, includes primarily stories about writers and the process of writing. These stories are narrated in the first person and marked by a self-consciousness which Lecker sees as facilitating, chiefly, their confessional style. He notes the increasing use of intertexts and the expanded time scheme as predominant characteristics. The stories Lecker examines as representative of this group are "The Years in Exile," "The Teeth of My Father," and "Private Parts: A Memoir" (Lecker 59-61).

These are all pertinent remarks; I would add to Lecker's insights, however, the observation that it is in the last group of stories that Metcalf is freqently at his most experimental: with the writer as protagonist, especially in a first-person narrative, the author is at liberty to explore the possibilities of language much more freely than in the case of, for example, a semi-literate protagonist. The linguistic concerns of the narrator become those of Metcalf

himself. This is not to suggest an identification of character and author-- merely of profession, and of professional interests. In "The Teeth of My Father," one of Metcalf's most self-reflexive fictions, narrator and author are so closely associated that Cameron fuses the two, calling the story "a moving elegy for Metcalf's father and a summing -up of his concerns as a writer" (Cameron "An Approximation of Poetry" 33). I am not convinced that this sort of identification might not narrow the scope of the story, defining it as autobiography rather than fiction which may or may not contain autobiographical elements. But the concerns of the protagonist, the writer who constructs the story we are reading, are clearly allied with those of the "real life" author. The inscription of the writing subject as a character in the story, as in "The Teeth of My Father," is a common technique of postmodern fiction. In order to discuss such devices any further, though, it would be wise to establish a working description of postmodernism. I will rely, more or less, on the one which Linda Hutcheon provides in the introduction to The Canadian Postmodern.

I think it is important to differentiate here between postmodernism and experimentation in general. In this thesis I will attempt to show that some of Metcalf's stories are non-traditional by focussing on various techniques that deconstruct the illusion of the homogeneity of the text,

techniques that point to the gaps and inconsistencies of discourse, that play with and against conventional assumptions about reading and writing. I consider postmodernist fiction as a type of experimental fiction, not necessarily the only type, but one which is becoming fairly well-known. The postmodern is, by definition, non-traditional-- it is what has come after the modern and reacted against it. If a text is postmodern, it is experimental in that it subverts the forms and ideas of modernism in some way. While the subject of my readings of Metcalf's fiction is experimentation, it must also involve some discussion of the postmodern.

Much has been written on postmodernism in Canada, and there has been considerable disagreement about what exactly the term means. I have chosen to use the definition of only one of its chief proponents in order to avoid having to weigh the merits of conflicting ideologies-- such considerations may be interesting, but they are beyond the scope of this paper. I have selected the work of Linda Hutcheon because it strikes me as particularly intelligent and relatively jargon-free.

Postmodernism, Hutcheon writes,

> would seem to designate art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive-- in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present. Its use of parody to echo past works signals its awareness that literature is made, first and foremost, out of other literature.

(Hutcheon 1)

Hutcheon frequently refers to the parody of other literary forms as a means by which postmodern fiction asserts its own status as text, acknowledging that it is a verbal structure which has grown out of other verbal structures and not some form of independent reality. Parody is perhaps not the only means of signalling the interdependence of texts: literary allusion in general, while it also occurs in more traditional works, may serve this purpose. Hutcheon proceeds to discuss the difficulty of distinguishing postmodernism from some forms of modernism. The Diviners, despite its postmodern techniques, is metafiction (fiction about fiction): it reveals more a "*modernist* search for order in the face of moral and social chaos than a *postmodern* urge to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any such desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination" (Hutcheon 2).

This distinction seems rather woolly: The Diviners can be read as an attempt not to find order but to expose the artificiality of any system of ordering (including that which memory imposes). This interpretation would lift the novel out of the category of "late modernism" and place it squarely within the bounds of the postmodern. The problem is inherent in any study of postmodernism: it is necessary to define one's terms but at the same time, a rigid system of classification

would seem to undermine the postmodern enterprise (which questions "the meaning [and value] of making firm distinctions between different forms of literature" [Hutcheon 21]) and to rely on an inflexible interpretation of the text. For these reasons, I may occasionallly elide the distinction Hutcheon establishes between late modernism and postmodernism in my examination of Metcalf's fiction.

Principally, though, Hutcheon's definition rests on a series of oppositions: the postmodern "both sets up and subverts the power and conventions of art;" it "establish[es] and then undercuts prevailing values" of contemporary society (Hutcheon 2,3). Postmodern novels "'inscribe' and then negate subjectivity;" "they represent and then undo representation" (Hutcheon 14). The purpose of the manipulation of traditional literary devices and the undermining of contemporary values is not to advocate some form of nihilism but to expose the presuppositions which inform them. The self-reflexivity of postmodern literature calls attention to the text as a verbal structure in order to emphasize the importance of language in terms of life in society, the relationship betweeen art and life, and the creation and expression of ideas.

* * *

This thesis contains three chapters. Chapters One and Two deal with short stories ("The Teeth of My Father" and "The

Eastmill Reception Centre"); Chapter Three is about a novella, "Private Parts: A Memoir." These texts are fundamentally self-reflexive: they indicate consistently and conspicuously a profound concern with reading and writing and how they work. "Postmodern literature," Hutcheon writes, "situates itself squarely in the context of its own reading and writing as social and ideological actualities" (Hutcheon 10). This is the principal effect of the self-consciousness of these texts.

"The Teeth of My Father," "The Eastmill Reception Centre," and "Private Parts" are all about writers; they are all narrated in the first person. Each involves a temporal and geographical shift from the protagonist's youth in England to his later life in North America. Thematically, they are concerned with similar ideas-- the role and responsibility of the artist, the connection between art and life, the concept of truth in fiction, and, most of all, the form and function of language.

Chapter One is chiefly concerned with the intertexts of "The Teeth of My Father." The intertexts interrupt the fiction of which they form a part, thus raising the question of what the principal narrative of the story is. The narrator's asides are also considered, and the business of the inscription of the writer as character-- both of these techniques underline the importance of the story as

construction, as artifice, by exposing its constructor and suggesting his limitations, as well as those of his medium.

The second chapter explores the rift which occurs part-way through "The Eastmill Reception Centre." Having presented a relatively traditional past-tense narrative, the writer-protagonist moves abruptly to a present-tense consideration of the first part of the story and what he intended it to do. While the first section of the story foregrounds obstructed communication in the world of the reformatory, the second manifests an attempt on the part of the narrator to break down obstacles to communication. His struggle for truth in fiction reveals an uncertainty about the nature of truth itself and how it can be achieved in language.

Chapter Three deals with "Private Parts"; it begins by examining the parody of forms such as the memoir, the novel of formation and the artist novel, the allegory and the confession. Intertextuality in the novella is broader in scope than in "The Teeth of My Father"-- it draws on music and the graphic arts as well as other writing. As in the two short stories, the self-reflexive narration signals the doubts and insecurities of the writer-protagonist. The chapter closes with an examination of three characteristics of language that emerge most prominently in the novella: its contextual operation, its aesthetics, and its power.

CHAPTER ONE: "THE TEETH OF MY FATHER"

"The Teeth of My Father," the title story of a collection published in 1975, is one of Metcalf's overtly metafictional pieces and has been described as one of his "most powerful--and poignant-- works" (Lecker 87). It is a framed first-person narrative in which the protagonist, a writer, recalls his childhood and the eccentricities of his father. The opening and closing sections focus on the principal character at a mature age; the intertexts they enclose present his experience as a child and young adult. (By "intertexts" here I mean those stories or portions of stories which are presented as such and printed in indented paragraphs.) As well as being a powerful expression of the relationship between the protagonist and his father, the story explores a number of major ideas. Among them (and recurring in the collection as a whole) are the isolation of the artist, the distinction (or lack of one) between life and art, and the process of narration itself.

"The Teeth of My Father" opens with the description of a beery afternoon in a hotel bar where the protagonist and an acquaintance swap yarns about their fathers. The tales prompt in the protagonist a series of further recollections

involving his father. The focus shifts here, moving from the recent into the distant past, as the narrator recounts his father's decision to have all his teeth extracted and subsequent experimentation with do-it-yourself denture kits. The next section begins, "Many years ago I wrote the following story:" and marks a significant progression in what has thus far appeared to be a relatively traditional fiction. The remaining sections of the text slide back and forth between the protagonist describing his past in the first person and the intertexts (which are independent stories or fragments thereof) in the third person. At one point, two additional voices are heard, those of writer and critic, and both comment on one of the intertexts. The ages of the principal characters of the embedded fictions increase as the story develops; this provides a semblance of chronological progression which balances any chaotic effect created by the multiple voices. The final section of the story circles back to the opening paragraphs by concentrating once again on the protagonist as an adult and a writer. The narrator relates the events which followed his father's death and then, using the present tense for the first time, describes his emotional release, the "drunken tears" on the sidewalk.

"The Teeth of My Father" exceeds the bounds of traditional realism in a number of ways. The self-reflexive narration and the inscription of the author as character both

destroy the illusion of the story as a fragment of reality, a slice of life that reaches the reader somehow unmediated by the manipulations of the author. The intertexts, paradoxically, both disrupt and sustain narrative continuity; they call into question the idea of the wholeness and independence of the text. Thematically, "The Teeth of My Father" sets up a complex relationship between art and life in which they are at once different and the same, in which each develops out of the other as well as itself.

In his discussion of Metcalf's first-person narratives, Lecker makes the following remarks:

> In its highest form, fiction becomes a mode of private confession developed from a self-conscious narrative stance; and the confession encompasses not only personal memory, but the rhetorical existence of the speaker as well. Self is revealed through aesthetic disclosure; aesthetic observation reflects a heightened concentration on the elements of narrative voice.
> (Lecker 80)

In "The Teeth of My Father," the "elements of narrative voice" are exploited throughout; the narrator's asides often point to key thematic concerns which would otherwise remain opaque. The third paragraph of the story provides a fine example of this; I will quote it in full:

> (I have decided to tell the truth. My stories in the River Room were not purely nostalgic; they were calculated to be funny and entertain my friend. My friend was more an acquaintance, a man I admired and wanted to impress. And "wilful legs" was plagiarized from Dylan Thomas.)
> (Selected Stories 174-5)

The fact that the paragraph is enclosed within parentheses sets it off from those which surround it, signalling difference. The sense of disruption is supported by the blunt statement of the first sentence. The paragraph, clearly, is a passage of authorial intervention, and the intervention creates several effects.

First, the shift from straight narration to the narrator commenting on his own narrative de-centres the story: at this early stage it is not clear which will become the focus of the remaining pages, narration or meta-narration. The interruption forecasts a number of others (intertexts, the section in italics) which will continue to displace and to complement the "realist" story.

Second, the admission that the writer has lied introduces the opposition between truth and falsehood (or fiction), which will be pursued throughout "The Teeth of My Father." If the writer has lied in the first two paragraphs, how are we to know that he will "tell the truth" now? Is this truth more truthful than that of the preceding paragraphs and what, in any context but particularly that of a work of fiction, can "truth" mean?

Third, the acknowledgement of plagiarism, like the intertexts, the reference to Thomas and the allusion to Joyce

(Rollins 189), underlines the interdependence of literary texts. "In literary terms," Metcalf has said, "one writes against a background and tradition. No literary work is created in a vacuum" (Hancock 102). "The Teeth of My Father" is concerned, more than anything else, with the process of writing; to ignore the insinuation of other texts into the writer's own would be to deny an important part of that process.

The most fundamental assertion of the passage cited above occurs in the second sentence: the narrator's stories "were calculated to be funny and entertain [his] friend. The stories told in the bar, "The Teeth of My Father," and literature in general are *calculated*; they are linguistic conjuring tricks designed to produce certain effects. The story is neither truth nor lies; alternatively, it is both at once. The parenthetical interjection, according to Cameron,

> invites the reader to realize that whether the incidents about to be narrated concerning the relationship between father and son are inventive or factual is irrelevant. The story, because it is fiction, a distillation of experience, which is available to us only through language anyway, has an imaginative truth that is more real, more true emotionally and psychologically, than autobiography in any factual or historical sense. [...] "The Teeth of My Father," then, is really about the craft of fiction itself, about the writer's art of shaping or manipulating empirical experience to give it a greater reality, about language.
> (John Metcalf 73-4)

The assertion that the story is true "emotionally and psychologically" seems, for a critic of Cameron's rigour, uncharacteristically vague. How are we to judge whether a story is "psychologically true?" I would argue that the implications of the passage push farther than this: Metcalf is suggesting that traditional distinctions between truth and falsehood do not apply to a work of fiction, that "fictional truth" is a contradiction of a sort and in any case no different from a fictional lie. The writer's statement that he has lied reminds us that fiction is not "true" in any ordinary sense of the word. The function of the third paragraph, then, is to show how the "writer's art of shaping or manipulating" works. It lays bare some of the devices of narrative in order to demonstrate the calculated-ness of the story and to subvert conventional assumptions about truth, realism, the function of language, the role of the author, and the nature of the literary text.

As Cameron points out, there are two other prime examples of self-reflexive narration in "The Teeth of My Father": the italicized dialogue between writer and critic, and the sentences which introduce the intertexts (JM 74). Both serve as reminders that the narrator is represented as the author and disrupt the kind of narrative continuity one expects in realist fiction. The italicized passage, like the authorial interventions, de-centres the story: instead of progressing

through the protagonist's childhood, we find ourselves immersed in a formal discussion about a story which constitutes only part of the story proper. Metcalf seems to be moving farther and farther away from "the centre of the anecdote," but the commentary on "Biscuits," of course, applies equally to the story as a whole. Most importantly, it raises the issue of the distinction between fiction and autobiography:

> *It is instructive, ladies and gentlemen, to examine the psychological implications of this sample of juvenilia if we may assume it to be autobiographical in fact or impulse.*
>
> Yes, you can assume that.
>
> (SS 178)

The excessively elaborate language of the critic conceals a certain prejudice. Would it be less instructive to "examine the psychological implications [etc.]" if the piece were not autobiographical? The hierarchy implicit in the critic's statement privileges autobiography over fiction. One of the principal themes of "The Teeth of My Father" involves the distinction between truth and fiction, which is intimately bound up with the opposition between fiction and autobiography. Truth, like history and (auto)biography, are traditionally seen as factual, occasionally misrepresented but generally verifiable. Fiction and lies, on the other hand, are made up, invented, spurious. In this story Metcalf erodes the distinction between the two sides in his emphasis on narration and language. Since autobiography, like fiction, is

communicated through language, written or spoken as a story, it is subject to the inescapable "calculated"-ness of all stories and can be no more or less truthful than fiction. Similarly, all fiction is autobiographical to the extent that it is written by someone who must draw on his/her own experience as well as on other fiction. The concern with autobiography in the above citation, which occurs at the beginning of the passage in italics, suggests the degree to which readers become distracted in their search for an absolute truth which cannot exist in language.

The voice of the writer acts as an ironic counterpoint to that of the critic, deflating verbosity through its own straight-forwardness. In addition, the statement of the writer is highly ambiguous. It may be an affirmation that "Biscuits" (and, by implication, "The Teeth of My Father") is an autobiographical piece. On the other hand-- note the shift from "may" to "can"-- it may suggest that the critic *can* assume whatever s/he likes, regardless of the usefulness of the assumption, and that there is not much the writer can do about it (indeed, he contributes nothing further in this passage). In any case, the principal function of the italicized section is to highlight the process of criticism, which is also the process of reading. "The Teeth of My Father" manifests an awareness that it will be read, that it must be read, that it cannot function without a reader and a

response.

The sentences which introduce the intertexts are uncharacteristically bland and uninformative:

> Many years ago I wrote the following story:
>
> ***
>
> I suggested something of the atmosphere of our family meals in the opening paragraph of a story called "Pretty Boy."
>
> ***
>
> I have written of it elsewhere:

(S S 176,179,180)

It is as if the narrator cannot be bothered to cover the same ground again. The sentences are incongruous in the context of the richly-textured prose which surrounds them. But it is context which is being emphasized here, after all. "I wrote," "I suggested," "I have written": the phrases sketch in a background, a body of literature already written by the narrator (and indeed the author) of "The Teeth of My Father." It is not that the narrator is too lazy to write a completely new story but that, in a sense, he cannot. Metcalf refuses to ignore the intrusion of previous writings on this story, a refusal which is demonstrated when he points to specific instances of intertextuality. Instead of camouflaging the embedded fictions, the sentences which precede them affirm their difference. This affirmation is simultaneously undermined by the very presence of the intertexts as part of

the story. Sentences such as "I have written of it elsewhere," then, reinforce the dual status of the intertext as both same and other, integral to and distinct from the story. The significance of this duality will, I hope, become clearer as we move now to focus on the intertexts themselves.

* * *

"The Teeth of My Father" contains four intertexts: "Biscuits," the opening paragraphs of "Pretty Boy" (a story published in The Lady Who Sold Furniture), an untitled fragment which describes the father's study, and "A Bag of Cherries." These embedded fictions exemplify the "dizzyingly metafictional" quality of "The Teeth of My Father" (Rooke 240); they emphasize, again, the importance of the story as story, as composite, calculated verbal structure. Lecker writes: "By juxtaposing previously told stories with the process of writing this story now, Metcalf establishes a fictional continuum reflecting the temporal and spatial linkages he must find in order to create art" (Lecker 88). But surely there is more to it than this-- by breaking up the "main" story with a series of narrative interruptions, Metcalf establishes a fictional *dis*-continuum which exposes the "temporal and spatial linkages" *we* must make in order to read. "The Teeth of My Father" is acutely aware of its own

textuality; I would like to propose a reading of the intertexts which focuses on the way in which they provide a model for narrative structure.

In Reading for the Plot, Peter Brooks develops a theory of plotting based on concepts central to Freudian psychoanalysis. Death, desire, and repetition, Brooks claims, are intricately bound up with plot. A story always moves toward its end, its death; the reader's desire to reach the end is a kind of death-wish. The process of narrative repetition is a remembering or re-telling of events which have already occurred. Each episode of a story makes sense only within its narrative context. Brooks sees these episodes as a chain of metaphors and, most importantly, as metaphors for the same thing. The "meaning" of a story is that which connects the repetitions, establishing a significant interrelation among them; the repetitions both postpone and build toward the final moment of recognition which, traditionally, illuminates the text retrospectively.

An example of this pattern of repetition and deferral occurs, significantly, at the end of the first section of "The Teeth of My Father," as if to prepare us for what is to follow. The father, having had all his teeth extracted as a money-saving measure, constructs a series of plaster dentures which never quite fit:

> Soon the teeth were melted down and recast every Saturday in readiness for the Sunday sermons. It was not until years later that I understood that had he produced an undeniably perfect pair it would have broken his heart.
>
> (SS 176)

The goal, then, is an illusion or a metaphor. Satisfaction is the result of a lengthy process of deferral, the casting of set after flawed set of teeth. The protagonist's moment of illumination occurs when he realizes that his father does not *want* the perfection he seeks but merely the seeking itself. Perfection "would have broken his heart": once the process ends and the goal has been met, what remains is death.

The intertexts of "The Teeth of My Father" may be read as a series of metaphors for obstructed communication which postpone the climax of death (physical and textual) at the end of the story. The first three intertexts emphasize the distance between father and son by highlighting the absence and silence of the father. The italicized passage which follows "Biscuits," despite its ironic overtones, underlines the fact that David's father is "far away"; a parallel is established between the writing males which does "suggest identification" with the father. The presence of the male parent in "Biscuits," however, remains muted-- unlike David's mother, who is in the same room and speaks to the boy, his father is mentioned only in one sentence, when David hears the noise of the typewriter. He is a shadowy figure, lurking in an enigmatic obscurity somewhere behind the principal

characters.

The second intertext plays up the absence of the father from the introductory sentence: "I usually saw my father only at meal times" (SS 179). This is corroborated by a reference which follows the intertext: "When my father returned at tea-time...." When the father is physically proximate, he does not appear much closer in spirit: "Allan's father, remote in his usual silence, did not look up when a cup of tea was placed in front of him." There is a marked difference between the mother who speaks (Allan waits "for her voice to stop") and the father who does not; the intertext flows smoothly into the next section, in which the brothers discuss their father "as if he were not present" and it is the protagonist who attempts to initiate conversation, with only limited success. A sense of claustrophobia pervades the intertext: the "impossibly orange daffodils," the enumeration of items on the table, the "stiff, starched serviettes in their silver rings" and the father's efforts to relieve the constriction of his collar suggest a mounting pressure which seeks release, a physical or atmospheric confinement which compounds the oppressive silence.

Communication, or lack of it, is also the subject of the third intertext, in which David explores his father's study. As in the "Pretty Boy" section, the introductory sentence

establishes the distance between father and son: "My father's study was a delight to me; I was not encouraged to enter it" (SS 180). The fact that David is "not encouraged" to penetrate the father's (physical and metaphorical) inner sanctum indicates an attempt on the part of the father to keep his son at arm's length. David resorts to sneaking into the study in order to make contact, if not with his father, at least with his father's books, which may be perused in secret. The stolen delights of the study seem to act as a substitute for conversation. Textuality is emphasized here, particularly in the description of the letter: "What might 'Q' mean? What secrets hid behind that heavy black letter with its graceful, curling tail?" These questions consider the letter as letter, a distinctively-shaped black mark-- they suggest that writing is not a window to another world but a series of marks in various combinations. Some implications of this concept are explored in the subsequent episode when David confuses "legion" with "lesion," an amusing misunderstanding but one which raises questions central to our understanding of reading and the nature of the signifier. The fact that the elegant Q is the pseudonym of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch is also significant. By focussing on a typographical character which is a name without actually being a word, Metcalf stresses the identity of the letter.

In the final intertext, the protagonist, now a university

student, visits his parents' home. He falls asleep before the train arrives and dreams of an encounter with his father. Whether or not any similar meeting actually took place is unclear; the fact that the dream is preceded by an erotic fantasy suggests that it also has no foundation in the reality of the story. In the dream, the father wears lay clothes, which may indicate a more profound transformation. Furthermore, the sense of companionship in the dream contrasts sharply with the banality of the conversation between father and son when the latter arrives. The repeated use of "they" represents a mutuality which occurs nowhere else in the story. The father tells his son about Oliver Cromwell and Emily Brontë; this communication is rendered in indirect speech and appears quite uncharacteristic, given the previous emphasis placed on his silence.

This dream is crucial to our understanding of the working of repetition in the text. The repeated episodes which underscore the father's silence and absence are here called into question by the apparently contradictory "recollection" of the dream. The narrator repeats in order to defer his confrontation with the reality of the relationship. The potential of that relationship is fulfilled only in the dream. Whether or not the dream recalls actual events is, ultimately, immaterial; its significance lies in its positioning at the end of a series of metaphors for obstructed communication.

"Chronological sequence," writes Brooks, "may not settle the issue of cause: events may gain traumatic significance by deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) or retroaction, action working in reverse sequence to create a meaning that did not previously exist" (Brooks 280). In the sequence of events as they occur outside the story, the *sjuzet*, a temporal gulf separates the dream from the final recognition and release. In the *fabula*, the sequence of episodes as they are presented in the story, the dream prompts the realization of unfulfilled potential which establishes a narrative, rather than a chronological, causality between the last two sections.

The final paragraphs of the story have been made possible by the intertexts which build up to them. The closing section may be divided into two episodes. The division is marked by the shift in time signalled by the word "now." At the time of the father's death, the narrator represses his emotions, a repression which is emphasized by the repetition of the assertion, "I did not cry" (SS 192). This repression of emotion constitutes the last in a series of metaphors for constriction and silence which seek release in the final three paragraphs. Brooks explains the relation of the repetitions to the end of the story in terms of the temporality of narrative, the way in which *sjuzet* and *fabula* work together: "The repetitions, which have served to bind the various plots,

both prolonging the detour and more effectively preparing the final discharge, have created that delay necessary to incorporate the past within the present and to let us understand end in relation to beginning" (Brooks 139). The incorporation of past with present is marked by the shift at this stage in the text to the present tense. The final paragraph, whose rhythmic perfection echoes the closing section of "Gentle as Flowers Make the Stones," runs as follows:

> Drunken tears but tears for you. For you. For both of us. Standing on the sidewalk in the cold fall evening of another country, my tears are scalding.
>
> (SS 193)

Here we see a syntactical variation on the metaphorical repetitions of the intertexts. The third sentence, "For both of us," announces the transformation which is the culmination of the repetitions. The process of working through the recollections of his father has enabled the protagonist to effect a retroactive rapprochement between them. The tears of the protagonist symbolize the discharge of emotion which is necessitated by the constriction of silence in the intertexts. The reference to the protagonist's writing of stories suggests that the text we have just read may be a further result of the discharge. Thus, the ending of the *sjuzet* circles back to the beginning of the *fabula*.

"The ultimate subject of any narrative," writes Brooks,

"is its narrating" (Brooks 305). There are three major points to be made about the intertexts in "The Teeth of My Father" and the way in which they draw attention to the subject of narrating. First, they work against the mimetic principles upon which traditional fiction is based. Cameron writes: "the effect is very much like a Brechtian alienation effect: an implicit repudiation of the illusionism of bourgeois realism. It questions the assumption that fiction directly reproduces the world" (JM 75-6). Second, the intertexts repeatedly figure the lack of communication between father and son, a silence which is broken by the very story which depicts it. The opposition between speech and silence runs throughout much of Metcalf's fiction and is particularly important in "The Teeth of My Father." In her commentary on the image of the father, bedridden from complications which arose out of the infection of his gums, Rooke writes: "This is a premonitory image, a foretaste of the father's death; it suggests the speechlessness against which writing struggles, the nightmare at the centre of all anecdote" (Rooke 243). Third, the intertexts set up a narrative thread which is at once intertwined with and independent of the dominant narrative. The fact that they are presented as different or deviant from the textual norm compels us to question our notions of centre and non-centre, of inside and outside. The intertexts, Rooke claims, "are 'inner' stories because they are contained within the story's frame and 'outer' because they precede it both in

fact and according to the fiction" (Rooke 240). In the opening section of the story, the protagonist poses a key question: "The centre of the anecdote?" (SS 175). The question remains unanswered because it is unanswerable. The "centre" of the story is a metaphor for the effect produced by the interaction of signifiers, and by their interaction with the reader. It remains permanently just beyond the horizon of our understanding.

* * *

Having concentrated so far on the form of "The Teeth of My Father" (chiefly, the narrative voice and intertexts), I would now like to address the principal themes of the story and their relation to the tenets of postmodernism. Major thematic oppositions include those between art and life, truth and fiction, speech and silence. Metcalf builds these oppositions around the relationship between the protagonist and his father, and especially the business of literary inheritance. As one approach to this inheritance and to the complex questions it raises, let us consider a pivotal section which precedes the final intertext of the story (SS 184-5).

In this episode, the narrator recounts his experience in church one Sunday , his embarrassment at the home-cobbled shoes he and his father are wearing as the latter performs the communion service. The anecdote is introduced by a clear

statement of literary inheritance:

> I studied my father. He was, unknowingly, teaching me what is now my craft.
> Inside my head, I practised the voices and inflections of his rhetoric, the rise and fall, the timing of the pause, the silence, the understated gesture, the rhetorical series of questions and their thundering denial.
>
> (SS 184)

The handing-down of speech patterns is complemented in the closing section of the story by the protagonist's retrieval of his dead father's pen and pencil. The art of communication, verbal and written, is passed on from father to son. (Feminist critics might have much to say about this process; I will leave its implications aside for the moment.)

The closing paragraphs of this section of the story illustrate the paradox of the inheritance:

> His voice directly in front of me.
> *A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you....*
> My fingers took the tiny glass.
> I looked down again and saw the bottom of his black gown, his trouser turn-ups, his black socks, his black shoes. Protruding beyond the rim of his left shoe was a flap of Stick-a-Sole. As he moved on the carpet's thick pile, swirling dust motes in the shaft of sunlight formed a nimbus round his feet.
>
> (SS 185)

The syntactical disruption created by the omission of the verb in the first sentence represents the barrier between the two characters-- although his father's voice is "directly in front of" the protagonist, the father cannot speak to the son directly but only through the text of the communion service.

Silently, he bequeaths to his son the power of language. The nimbus around his feet is both "ironic and perfectly serious" (Rooke 245). In an image whose potential sentimentality is checked by parody, the son accepts the poorly-cobbled shoes along with the finely-cobbled words:

> The narrator will walk in his father's shoes, for reasons of love as well as art. This is what the story had left out. And beautifully, Metcalf closes in on it-- revealing *in a moment of high art* the primacy of love. He lets the "other" become radiant. He closes the gap by acknowledging it, by his admission that there are dimensions of the father's being that do not "fit" the narrator's own design.
>
> (Rooke 245)

The business of paternity is a question of origin, and in "The Teeth of My Father," Metcalf sets up and subverts the traditions of modernism by presenting a "real" origin for the story while at the same time eroding the distinction between the real and the fictional. The ostensible source of creativity in the story is the father: it is he who hands down the tools of the trade and whose eccentricities provide the raw material of the plot. Constantly pulling against the location of origin in the father, however, are the text's explicitly self-disruptive elements. The intertexts and allusions act as a reminder that the origin of the story lies not in reality but in a number of other stories. "Following the river to the origins of his craft, [the narrator] admits

influences," writes Lecker, "and, through the form of his tale, he indicates that for him art *is* life. After all, the narrator's reality is comprised only of the stories he tells about stories, mirrors held up to himself" (Lecker 88). Cameron succinctly identifies the relationship between life and art as it is presented in the story:

> In questioning the borderline between reality and fiction and emphasizing metafictionally the status of the text as artifact, the story implies that there is nothing but fiction, no reality apart from its narration, no being except through language. We are reminded that we are not really watching life but reading fiction, that fiction is language, that stories and people in fiction are merely words, and that there are really no descriptions in fiction, only constructions.
> (JM 76)

To consider "The Teeth of My Father" solely in realist terms, as an act of homage to the father of the narrator, is to do it a great injustice as a work of fiction. Through its constant insistence on language and textuality, the story "closes the gap," in Rooke's words, between life and art, truth and fiction, concepts which traditionally have been paired as opposites and ranked so as to privilege the side of "reality."

CHAPTER TWO: "THE EASTMILL RECEPTION CENTRE"

Like "The Teeth of My Father," "The Eastmill Reception Centre" is an explicitly metafictional text. In "The Teeth of My Father," as we have seen, the intertexts and authorial interventions disrupt the narrator's reminiscences at strategic points. In "The Eastmill Reception Centre," what appears to be a realist narrative breaks off in mid-stream, at which point the writing subject embarks on a self-reflexive meditation which constitutes the remainder of the story . (It is interesting to note that this story, first published in 1981, has attracted less critical attention than, for example, "Single Gents Only," a piece which is much more traditional in form and which appeared a year later.) More so, perhaps, than any other of Metcalf's texts, "The Eastmill Reception Centre" is distinguished by a relentless questioning of the way in which language works, and of the significance of those workings to our understanding of the self, of knowledge, and of communication.

"The Eastmill Reception Centre" is narrated in the first person by Cresswell, a young university graduate who takes a job at a boys' reformatory. His colleagues are eccentric, power-hungry, paranoid or alcoholic. His pupils are

"working-class boys who were all, without exception, of low average intelligence or mildly retarded" (Adult Entertainment 103). They, at least, display an innate cheerfulness and lack of pretension which renders them more engaging. Cresswell identifies increasingly with one Dennis Thompson, whose crime was arson. Dennis comes to represent, it seems, a not-very-noble savage; he is associated with uncivilized impulse and good-natured destruction, which appeal to the repressed desires of the metafictional narrator.

Life at the reformatory consists of a series of highly-regulated and often bizarre routines; Cresswell throws a wrench in the works by sympathizing with his captives to the extent of allowing an entire cricket team to escape one afternoon. Here the traditional narrative ends and the metafictional one begins; the narrator embarks on a consideration of endings in general, this ending in particular, desire, freedom, and, most of all, the difficulty of expressing what he wants to say. Obstructed or disrupted communication is indeed foregrounded in "The Eastmill Reception Centre," and I will examine in this chapter first the way in which language itself brings about these obstructions and, second, the narrator's attempts to overcome them.

The small community of the reformatory seems plagued by

a profound inability to relay information among its members. There are two principal reasons for this condition: formula and fragmentation. Formulaic speech patterns (particularly cliché) constantly attempt to relay meanings which remain undecipherable by their addressees; cliché is so widely applicable that it loses any specific significance. The persistence of tired expressions indicates in this story an inability to articulate thought, perhaps even to think. Fragmentation poses another major problem; when words or groups of words are isolated from a signifying context, they cease to signify. But this is rather general: let us consider some examples of obstructed communication within the story.

When Cresswell arrives at the Eastmill Reception Centre, Uncle Arthur is the one who shows him around. Uncle Arthur advises Cresswell not to visit the Headmaster's office until the next day, and then not before mid-morning:

> "A nod's as good as a wink," he said, "if you get my drift."
> "Oh, right" I said. "Of course."
> "That's the ticket!" said Uncle Arthur.
>
> (Adult Entertainment 89)

Evidently, neither the nod nor the wink has enlightened the narrator; Uncle Arthur's statement is presented as an explanation but in fact explains nothing whatsoever. When Cresswell does meet the Headmaster, their conversation is less ambiguous but no more satisfactory from Cresswell's point of

view:

> "The red," he said, pointing, "the green, the contrasting foliage, known as the filler, is called Alternamthera."
> I nodded again and said,
> "It's extremely impressive, Headmaster."
> "A tender annual," he said.
> "Pardon?"
> "Alternamthera."
> "Ah!" I said.
>
> (AE 100)

The narrator's exclamation ironically underlines the utter meaninglessness of the discussion. As the story progresses, the misunderstandings accumulate. Soon after his meeting with the Headmaster, Cresswell encounters the staff psychologist:

> "Good evening," I said. "My name's Cresswell."
> "James," he said [...]
> "Not *Dr.* James?"
> "Well, not really. It's a Ph.D. You're from a university. I did *try* to explain..."
>
> (AE 101)

Communication problems are not limited to the reformatory staff. In a grammar lesson, Dennis claims his father had cancer of the vowel. Cresswell provides samples of the "lunatic discussions" which take place in his classroom:

> [Paul] would make pronouncement:
> I'm not saying that they are and I'm not saying that they're not but what I *am* saying is...
> Then would follow some statement so bizarre or so richly irrelevant that it imposed stunned silence.
> He would then re-comb his hair.
>
> (AE 104)

The conversations, then, are characterized by absurdity.

Dialogue consists of statements which are understood only by the speaker. People speak quite frequently but do not converse; there is no exchange.

Metcalf explores in "The Eastmill Reception Centre" the duplicitous effects of formulaic language on perception and communication. The euphemistic title signals this duplicity. The function of the reformatory is to to confine its inhabitants rather than to receive them; furthermore, the "Centre" operates on the margins of society. "Uncle" Arthur, who speaks in an idiom which suggests benign familiarity, is in fact a rigid authoritarian. The discipline he values highly involves the repetition of action which is frequently purposeless (for example, the daily raking and hoeing of soil in which nothing is ever planted): the virtue lies not in the nature of the activity but in its repetition. Similarly, Uncle Arthur's speech comprises a variety of dicta whose alleged validity rests principally on their continual reiteration. The speech of the reformatory staff as a group is characterized in the following passage by mindless repetition; the lack of quotation marks, the repetition of "etc." and the failure to identify individual speakers demonstrate the indistinguishable vacuousness of the statements:

> But conversation always reverted to pay scales, overtime rates, the necessity of making an example of this boy or that, of sorting out, gingering up, knocking the stuffing out of etc. this or that young lout who was trying it on,

> pushing his luck, just begging for it etc.
> (AE 106)

Metcalf's point here is pointlessness. Cliché signifies the refusal to articulate a principle and constitutes blind adherence to learned behaviour merely because the behaviour is learned. Cliché is potentially dangerous; it may manufacture an ideology whose implications need examining.

The fragmentation of language is another prime means of creating confusion. Individual words do not mean the same thing to all people. Metcalf repeatedly emphasizes in "The Eastmill Reception Centre" the contextual operation of language, as in the passage which describes a reading lesson:

> Dennis could chant the alphabet from A to Z without faltering, but he had to start at A. His mind was active, but the connections it made were singular.
>
> If I wrote CAT, he would stare at the word with a troubled frown. When I sounded out C-A-T, he would say indignantly: Well, it's *cat*, isn't it? We had a cat, old tom-cat. Furry knackers, he had, and if you stroked 'em...
>
> F-I-S-H brought to mind the chip shop up his street and his mum who wouldn't never touch rock salmon because it wasn't nothing but a fancy name for conger-eel.
>
> C-O-W evoked his Auntie Fran-- right old scrubber *she* was, having it away for the price of a pint...
>
> (AE 103-4)

Cameron compares these "instances of arbitrary signification" to "the later play on 'bowel' and 'vowel' and the multiple signifieds generated by 'bail'" (JM 123). The spelling-out of

the words on the page indeed points in the direction of Saussure's model of arbitrary signification; it also makes those words seem less absolute by demonstrating that they can be decomposed into constituent letters, just as the sentence may be broken down into separate words. "F" does not mean much to Dennis, little more, perhaps, than "Alternamthera" means to Cresswell in his conversation with the Headmaster, cited above. In both cases, the addressee requires a signifying context in order to make some sense of the fragments of language.

The Headmaster's speeches to the boys provide another example of the disruption of language, particularly since they occur at various intervals during the recital of the Lord's Prayer, one of the most set of set texts. The absurdity of the morning ceremonies is typographically accentuated by a number of very short paragraphs (one of Metcalf's comic hallmarks). It stems primarily from a departure from convention-- the fragmentation of the prayer-- which is ironic when one considers the subjects of the Headmaster's lectures:

> The morning appearances of the Headmaster were predictably unpredictable. The Lord's Prayer was interspersed with outbursts about what would happen if boys did not pull their weight, the excessive use of toilet-paper, an incoherent homily concerning the flotilla of small craft which had effected the strategic withdrawal of the British Army from Dunkirk, and, concerning departures from routine, detailed aphasic

instructions.

(AE 105)

The Headmaster, who abhors departures from routine, is himself "predictably unpredictable"; his statements are all the more ridiculous because of his inability to recognize his own aberrance. The issue of deviance is central here, not only to Metcalf's conception of language as it is presented in this story, but in terms of the work as a whole. One might claim that, like the Headmaster, "The Eastmill Reception Centre" is "predictably unpredictable," that Metcalf follows a more or less realist line only to swerve away from it in the final section of the story in order to unsettle our ideas about linearity. In terms of fragmentation, however, it is not the fragmenting itself that poses a problem but the juxtaposition of wholly unrelated thoughts and texts by a drunken sermonizer. Disruption can be effective, but in this case the effect is merely incoherence.

The disruption Metcalf effects when he abandons the traditional narrative of "The Eastmill Reception Centre" serves a number of clearer purposes. (Cameron notes the discontinuities of the 'realist' section of the story, which build toward the break on page 108 [JM 122]; the distinction between the two sections, nevertheless, is immediately apparent.) The new narrative voice insists on the fictionality of the story by discussing the strategies not

only of writing but of writing "The Eastmill Reception Centre":

> If I were interested in finishing this story, in cobbling it up into something a bit more robust, it's here that I ought to shape the thing towards what would be, in effect, a *second* climax and dénouement.
>
> (AE 108-9)

It is interesting to note that Metcalf chooses the metaphor of "cobbling" here, the same figure which acquires significance in that section of "The Teeth of My Father" which describes the Sunday service and the father bestowing a literary inheritance upon his son. The verb forms ("If I were...I ought to ") exemplify, once again, the duplicity of language in their suggestion that the writer is *not* interested in finishing the story and indeed that the story is unfinished. "The Eastmill Reception Centre" was published in The Fiddlehead and, later, in Adult Entertainment: we may assume that it *is* complete, at least in some sense of the word. And the sense of the word is all-important-- Metcalf is implying that the story is not "finished" in a traditional sense, that it does not meet traditional expectations of the story form. The story shifts to a different voice and also to a different set of ideas about the form, structure, and function of fiction.

In "The Eastmill Reception Centre," as in "The Teeth of My Father," Metcalf questions the distinction between fiction

and autobiography. The writer acknowledges his flawed memory and designates certain elements of the story as either fictional or autobiographical. "There *was* a Dennis," he asserts, "though I have no idea now what his name was" (AE 110). The repetition of "I can imagine" and "I can see" in the rendering of Dennis's childhood identifies the passage as made-up, not recalled (AE 111). However, like the statement of the narrator in "The Teeth of My Father," "I have decided to tell the truth," these distinctions are entirely illusory. We have no way of knowing when the writer is "telling the truth," and the writer himself may not know ("*Did* you burn down houses in Penge? I don't know, can't remember if I invented that" [AE 113-4]). Even the writer's attempts to come clean in the final section of the story-- his admission that he invented names and incidents, and that his memory may be faulty-- are misleading, since they imply that the story is composed of two parts, one invented and fictional, the second honest and somehow more true. Metcalf is playing games by establishing an opposition between "fictional" and "autobiographical" portions of the story, an opposition we must be careful to resist as it becomes increasingly clear that, for Metcalf, the distinction is arbitrary, unverifiable, irrelevant.

Despite the fact that the metafictional section of the story is no more or less true (and no more or less fictional)

than that which precedes it, strong evidence exists in the second section of a desire to overcome the obstacles to communication. The description of the fire in the dump at night is followed by this passage:

> At that moment, my heart filled with a kind of-- it's a strange word to use, perhaps, almost embarrassing, but I *will* say it-- filled with a kind of *joy*.
>
> What disturbed me, upset me, was that the feeling was so violent, so total. No. No, that's not what upset me.
>
> (AE 110)

The hesitation of the first paragraph, underlined by the dashes and italics, and the contradiction in the second suggest that the narrator is struggling to be honest (if we admit the notion of fictional honesty) and to express whatever it is that honest introspection leads him to. This effect is further reinforced by frequent qualification and self-doubt:

> Drifting into sleep or lying half-awake, I picture fire. And I'm filled with an envious longing. Though I ought to qualify 'envious'. As I qualify most things. This isn't making much sense, is it? But listen. This is difficult for me, too.
>
> (AE 110)

The conflict between the need to articulate and the easy obfuscations of language rises to a climax in the last lines of the story. Here, fragmentation is constructive, since it represents the breaking-down of facile explanations into a short, forceful expression of desire:

> Let me try to find words that perhaps you'll understand. Words! Understand! Good Christ, will it never end, this blathering!
>
> Dennis. Dennis. Listen!
>
> Dennis, I envy you your--

> *Christ, man! Out with it!*
> Dennis. Listen to me.
> Concentrate.
> Dennis, I wish *I* had a tattoo.
> (AE 114)

The final paragraphs of "The Eastmill Reception Centre" are highly significant, illustrating as they do one of the principal tensions in this story and in many of Metcalf's first-person narratives. The writer's attempt to "find words that perhaps you'll understand" results in a statement which is both a specific reference to Dennis's tattoo and an inscriptive metaphor. Having fought throughout the final section to "say what [he wants] to say," to avoid the kind of non-sense which pervades the speech of Uncle Arthur and the Headmaster, the writer finds that the only way he can write his desire (for the "joy" of the fire, the excitement of living "off hostile country") is in metaphor. The final sentence is crucial: the tattoo is surprising, absurd, but at the same time it represents the only logical conclusion to the narrative stutterings of the story's second section. Dennis's tattoo is a sailing ship; more precisely it is the *image* of a sailing ship-- its sign. And a sign, the right sign, is exactly what the narrator has been looking for.

The final paragraphs of the story demonstrate two conflicting ideas about language. The first paragraph cited above suggests that there is a thing ("this"), a thought to be expressed; language is a vehicle for communication. If we

find the right words to translate the thought, we will be understood. On the other hand, the final sentence, a metaphorical expression of displaced desire, suggests that it is not possible to express that desire in 'plain words,' that language is irreducibly metaphorical and that there can be no understanding without words. The final statement is at once a resignation to and an affirmation of the metaphorical workings of language. It implies a response to the question posed above: "Good Christ, will it never end, this blathering?" The answer, in the words of Paul de Man: "No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words" (de Man 122).

CHAPTER THREE: "PRIVATE PARTS"

The opposition of two fundamentally different ideas about the workings of language in the final paragraphs of "The Eastmill Reception Centre" exemplifies the tension between modernism and postmodernism that informs much of Metcalf's most interesting fiction. The idea that "real" experience and its meaning(s) can be accurately communicated through a careful selection of words is a modernist one; it conflicts with the perception of language as *différance*, a structure that creates its own experience and meaning. Much contemporary Canadian literature finds itself in the unsettling position of being caught between the old and the new: modern and postmodern, New Criticism and postructuralism, Old World and New World.... Metcalf's fiction tends to emphasize rather than to elide such differences. This process of unsettling, of shaking up, of exploring the questions instead of laying down the answers, is what distinguishes the postmodern from the modern. In this chapter I will examine "Private Parts" as a postmodern text that, through its parody of literary forms, its intertextuality and self-reflexive narration, and its exploration of language, refuses to resolve the oppositions it establishes and

ultimately provides no answers but only more questions.

"Private Parts" is a tragicomic first-person narrative in which the protagonist, T. D. Moore, describes the anxiety caused by the conflicting impulses of the Spirit and the Flesh. Part I is set in England; it chronicles the trials of an adolescent Moore who becomes increasingly desperate in trying to escape both his virginity and the religious fanaticism of his mother. In Part II, which takes place in Canada, Moore reveals that his success has been limited: although he is no longer a virgin, his sex life is unsatisfactory and he is plagued by feelings of penile inadequacy; furthermore, he remains haunted by memories of a past which both attracts and repels him. As a child, Moore sees art as a means of liberation; now a university professor and minor writer, he distrusts, it seems, not only his own writing but language itself. Thematically, the novella works with many of Metcalf's favourite paradoxical relationships: those which exist between the Old World and the New, art and life, truth and lies, autobiography and fiction.

Grappling with the elusive definition of the term "postmodern," Hutcheon stresses the importance of parody as a key element: "[Postmodernism's] use of parody to echo past works signals its awareness that literature is made, first and

foremost, out of other literature" (Hutcheon 1). "The irony and distance implied by parody," she writes,

> allow for *separation* at the same time as the doubled structure of both ... demands recognition of complicity. ... Parody is a typical postmodern parodoxical form because it uses and abuses the texts and conventions of the tradition.
>
> (Hutcheon 7-8)

The subtitle of "Private Parts: A Memoir" acknowledges, however ironically, one of the novella's chief literary origins. The Oxford Companion to English Literature defines the "memoir-novel" as "an early form of the novel, purporting to be a true autobiographical history... but in fact largely or wholly fictitious" (Drabble 637). In announcing itself as a memoir, a form that claims to be something it is not, "Private Parts" proclaims from the outset its own duplicity while raising the question of the distinction between autobiography and fiction.

The memoir, though, is by no means the only literary form whose possibilities Metcalf exploits in "Private Parts." Cameron refers to "this autobiographically-structured story" as "a play on both the conventions of the memoir and the bildungsroman and *Kunstlerroman*, the novel of formation and the artist novel" (JM 92). The irony of the play on the novel of formation is particularly poignant since the term suggests the building of an identity rather than the fragmentation we witness in Moore. As regards the artist novel, while Moore is

an artist (who supports himself by teaching), he describes his own writing in a quiet, matter-of-fact way that fails to conceal an undercurrent of disillusionment verging on despair:

> But I did become a writer of sorts; not the kind of writer I'd dreamed of becoming in my Croyden adolescence; the Muse hovers but does not ravish me. ... I have some small reputation in a minor genre in the parochial world of Canadian letters.
>
> (Girl in Gingham 76)

"Private Parts" focuses partly on Moore's attempts to reconcile what he is with what he longed to become; the "artist novel" is about not only Moore the artist but the "ravished" writer he might have been. The essence of the bildungsroman and *Kunstlerroman* is character; in "Private Parts" Metcalf "uses and abuses" the conventions of form in order to create expectations about his protagonist that are consistently undermined.

Two other literary forms I would like to consider in relation to "Private Parts" are allegory and the confession. The opening section of the novella draws heavily on Biblical imagery, with its pastoral setting, the river Eden, the references to the war in the distance, and Aunt Lizzie and Uncle Fred as grotesques of Adam and Eve. (More detailed comparisons may be found in Lecker's study [Lecker 89-91] and Metcalf's own "Notes on Writing a Story.") According to Lecker,

> Metcalf does make use of the allegorical mode to broaden the implications of the narrator's tale and to draw our attention to the metaphorical aspects of his experience. ... It is Metcalf's ability to fashion "Private Parts" as a particularized allegory that makes the novella so successful.
>
> (Lecker 89)

A careful balance, then, between allegory and realism is effected here; the two modes work with and against each other to create the "particularized allegory" Lecker describes. The parodic allegory reflects Moore's ambivalence toward his past; the realism suggests an unwillingness to romanticize it.

The allegorical motif is strongest in Part I, section one, although it is maintained to some degree throughout the novella. In Part II, however, Lecker argues,

> Moore's masturbatory impulse has been transformed into a self-reflexive fiction; and the repressed puritan directive to "*Wash yourself*" emerges verbally in Moore's design to *watch himself* and come clean through his chief narrative form-- that of the confession.
>
> (Lecker 95)

Like "The Eastmill Reception Centre," "Private Parts" manifests in its latter half a marked tendency on the part of the narrator toward qualification and self-criticism. There is, indeed, a strong sense of the desire to "come clean," to identify falsehood, to approach the truth through honesty:

> How neatly the repetition of that confession is managed! How prettily worked its repetitions, its movements in and out of italic.
>
> Lies. Mainly lies.
>
> (GG 66)

Here, as in "The Eastmill Reception Centre," the narrator repudiates his own linguistic gambits. He confesses that even his confession is partly false. The word "mainly" is crucial in this regard, since the reader has no way of knowing where the lies are and which sections must then be truth. The answer, of course, is that the narrator's attempts to distance himself from his text are as artificial as the "rhetoric" of his confession. Moore's impulse to pop out of a story in which he plays the two principal roles (those of narrator and protagonist) and to flag certain sentences with warning signs may suggest a desire to separate truth from lies. Yet we have no more reason to believe him now than before; indeed, we are told that, like Cresswell, Moore is increasingly incapable of distinguishing between his life and his fiction. Thus, as a series of confessions, some of which discredit others, "Private Parts" functions in a highly self-reflexive manner, foregrounding the futility of the quest for a truth that cannot be found in the language of fiction.

In "Private Parts" the parody of literary forms (among them the memoir, the novel of formation and the artist novel, the allegory and the confession) reinforces two major ideas. First, the use of techniques not normally associated with contemporary fiction situates the novella in a literary tradition. It affirms the dependence of literature on other

literature and the interrelation of literary genres. Second, because "Private Parts" is not fully a memoir, allegory, etc., the use of parody highlights difference: it points ironically to what Moore and the novella are *not*. Just as the protagonist remains unable to assimilate the private parts of his past and present into a unified, compact whole, so the novella branches off in different directions and resists homogenization.

* * *

Like the parody of forms in "Private Parts," the continual references to art and artists contextualize the novella by pointing to the creative framework from which it derives. Intertextuality is a characteristically postmodern device because it stresses the intrusion and influence of other art forms on a given text. In "Private Parts" intertextuality occasionally takes the form of allusion, as in the allegorical passages of Part I, section one, or Moore's frustrated cry (borrowed from Hopkins's "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord"): "Why must disappointment all I endeavour end?" (GG 67). At other times, Moore presents direct quotations from sources as varied as Cleland, Swinburne, H.D., and Dr. Ethel Fawce (whom he introduces as the author of Sex and The Adjusted You and whose voice bears some resemblance to that of

the supercilious critic in "The Teeth of My Father"). Sometimes he simply lists preferred artists:

> I soon came to favour the pianists and bluesmen- Cripple Clarence Lofton, Jelly Roll, Speckled Red, Yancey, Meade Lux Lewis, and those massive women, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Bertha Chippie Hill.
>
> (GG 46)

In echoing or citing texts, and in naming writers and artists, "Private Parts" draws attention to the relationship between the individual work and the artistic tradition. Lecker describes Moore as "an artist who expresses his own experiences by commenting on others' art and by seeing his own work in relation to theirs" (Lecker 89). Moore's experience of other art, then, is integral to his own narration, and "Private Parts" is constructed, at least in part, from other texts (this effect is most self-conscious and most physical when the intertext is a direct quotation). While the intertexts are incorporated into the novella in a perfectly natural manner, Hutcheon reminds us that "what postmodernism has done is to show how the 'natural' is in fact the 'constructed,' the made, the social" (Hutcheon 12). The sheer number of allusions in "Private Parts" clearly manifests Metcalf's concern with the function of the text in a body of artistic works, and, conversely, the role of those works in this particular text.

It is perhaps significant that the vast majority of Moore's references to other art forms involve those which have

affected him in the past, usually the distant past. This intensifies the opposition between Moore's past life and his present: the reader is left wondering what, if anything, affects him now. Moore and his friend Gerry

> always talked about the past, things that happened twenty years and more ago, old wounds, old friends, old grievances, the two who were already dead, as if we could only be comfortable in mythology, in events upon which time had imposed some imaginable order. We seemed to live there more brightly than in our present, with more enthusiasm than we would in our imaginable future.
>
> (GG 71)

While Moore seems to hold no great hopes for the future, he also has considerable trouble dealing with the present, and the conspicuous omission of any reference to contemporary art reinforces the sense that he lacks the energy required by passionate feeling, that he is not now capable of being "ravished," either by the Muse or by anything else.

In "The Teeth of My Father" the principal intertexts are presented as excerpts from the works of the narrator. They are both part of "The Teeth of My Father" and independent fictions, by virtue of the fact that they are introduced as such. Furthermore, while the narrator claims authorship, it is not difficult to ascertain that these intertexts are in fact sections of stories written by Metcalf. The presence of the intertexts in the story raises a number of questions: how are we to read them, in the context of "The Teeth of My Father"? What is the effect on the text of the stories the

author has written in the past and how does the reader's interpretation of these stories affect the reading of the text? How are we to deal with the association of writer and narrator, effected through the narrator's claim to have written the intertexts?

In "Private Parts," intertextuality is broader in scope: the novella reverberates with the works of numerous writers and other creative artists, chiefly those of the past. If we are to consider the effect of other works on our reading of a given text, the principal question here would seem to be: why does Moore, unlike the narrator of "The Teeth of My Father," not quote his own work? Why does he appear unable to resolve his obsession with the past, an obsession that is reflected as much through intertextuality as in the description of his life in the present? While the allusions to artists from the past often generate a sense of satisfaction or appreciation, the few which involve recent writing (Clit Hunger, for example) focus on unsatisfied desire and sexual anxiety.

Intertextuality, then, creates two principal oppositions in "Private Parts": that which exists between the novella and other art forms, and between present and past. The former is a primary concern of postmodernist writing; the latter underlines the essence of Moore's existence in the present, the problematics of the dialectic between what was and what

is. Both of these considerations will be explored further in the discussion of self-reflexive narration in "Private Parts."

* * *

The self-reflexive narrative of "Private Parts" is an important aspect of stylistic experimentation in the text; it has, however, been discussed in some detail by Rollins, Cameron and Lecker so I will not spend much time on it here. Briefly, though, Moore's frequent interruptions of his own narration signal Metcalf's concern with the processes of reading and writing. Postmodern literature, according to Hutcheon, "situates itself squarely in the context of its own reading and writing as social and ideological actualities" (Hutcheon 10). "The 'discourse' of literature," she writes,

> consists of a situation in which the writer, the reader, and the text meet within an entire historical, social, and political, as well as a literary context. And postmodern novels themselves try to draw attention to this discursive situation.
>
> (Hutcheon 16)

By reiterating Moore's distrust of his own ability to communicate, Metcalf emphasizes the problematic relationship between reader and writer. When Moore says, "Style betrays me," we are reminded that texts are written by writers, and that there may be imperfections in the writer, the language, or our reading. At the same time, Moore's self-doubt suggests a frankness which belies these concerns. Rollins writes:

> Having shattered the illusion of Moore as a conventionally reliable first-person narrator, Metcalf paradoxically strengthened it by seeming to move Moore closer to the reader. Moore's complaints about his inability to overcome technique and get to the heart of the truth are designed to create the impression of a more direct and unmediated voice, a voice more capable of intimate confession.
>
> (Rollins 197-8)

In a skilful layering of technique on technique and illusion on illusion, Metcalf deliberately exposes his narrative strategies through self-reflexive narration.

The crux of all this narrative and metanarrative layering is, as usual, language itself, and how it works in fiction. Rollins's explanation is pertinent here:

> Metcalf makes clear in "Notes on Writing a Story," an essay on the novella's opening section, that he is more vitally interested in the story as process. It is probably for this reason that his narrator is made to remind the reader from time to time that what is being read is the product of conscious manipulation and that it is impossible for the writer in pursuit of truth to write anything but fiction.
>
> (Rollins 197)

Like Mr. Montague, the monologuist who instills in the young Moore a desire to "become other people, be applauded, be magical" (GG 21), Metcalf is a performance artist, a conjuror of language. The narration of "Private Parts" draws attention to the tricks of his trade; in the final section of this chapter I will discuss some examples of his preoccupation with

the tools.

* * *

Metcalf's concern with the processes of reading and writing extends naturally to an abiding interest in words: how they sound, what they mean, and when they mean it. There are numerous examples in "Private Parts" of Metcalf's specific attention to particular words and phrases and their effects; the ones I will consider here point to three principal concepts: context, evocation, and power. As we saw in "The Eastmill Reception Centre," words divorced from a context become meaningless, create confusion. This idea is repeated in Part One of "Private Parts," where the effect is heightened by the point of view, that of a small boy. The conventions of language are incomprehensible to the young Moore, who hears the same phrases used to express quite different ideas:

> They had taught [Bobby] to march up and down the yard with his pitch-fork on his shoulder like a rifle and he liked to do that more than mucking-out and when Uncle Fred saw him he'd yell, "Get out of that, you girt softie! Get down the barn, you daft lummox!" and then he'd yell, "Move yourself, bollock-brains!" but the funny thing was that he called him all the same things when he was pleased with him, when the barn was finished early or he hadn't tipped over the wheelbarrow in the yard.
>
> (GG 9)

Like the short story itself, spoken idiom relies heavily on tone, structure (what precedes and what follows the

utterance), and point of view (or our understanding of the personality of the speaker) in order to communicate meaning. The paragraph which follows the one cited above begins: "Uncle Fred's Italians slept in bunks in one of the barns. He called them all Albert." The absurdity of this statement lies in the use of a specific name to designate a variety of individuals. But words rarely suggest a single idea, and Uncle Fred's generalization is merely a comic exaggeration of the way in which we communicate. It reinforces the notion that communication relies on verbal arrangement and punctuation as much as the meanings of individual words. This concept recurs throughout the novella but is foregrounded particularly in Part One, perhaps because its expression is facilitated by the point of view. When the boy confuses lisle stockings with Tate and Lyle's Golden Syrup he demonstrates inexperience with language, and his slip recalls the play on "lesion" and "legion" in "The Teeth of My Father" and "bowel" and "vowel" in "The Eastmill Reception Centre," all of which point to the arbitrariness of the signifier and the necessity of a signifying context.

Cliché is another example of the meaninglessness of decontextualized language, and its exploitation in "Private Parts" echoes the pronouncements of Uncle Arthur in "The Eastmill Reception Centre." Moore describes his post-evacuation life in the city as follows:

> Our way of life was like the enactment of a set of improving proverbs. Early to bed and early to rise, we wasted not, we stitched in time, took care of the pence, made sure our hands were never idle, received the reward of virtue which is its own.[...]
>
> My mother's conversation was a compendium of homely cliché; our drink was Adam's Ale or "the cup that cheers," all activities were powered by "elbow grease", all locomotion by "shanks' pony"; if at first we didn't succeed, we tried and tried and tried again; supper was always Hobson's Choice.
>
> (GG 12-13)

As in "The Eastmill Reception Centre," cliché and euphemism stand for narrow-mindedness and deception. Cliché represents the inability or the unwillingness to communicate and Metcalf frequently indicates the incongruity of associations prompted by cliché:

> People in my world actually used such expressions as 'Anti-Christ,' 'The Great Beast,' and 'Whore of Babylon.' 'Scarlet Woman' was sometimes Rome and 'Whore of Babylon' was sometimes Rome and 'Scarlet Woman' was sometimes not Rome but Mrs. Henderson who 'carried on' with soldiers.
>
> (GG 13)

By emphasizing the shifting meanings of language, Metcalf demonstrates that there is nothing absolute about the sign, the connection between signifier and signified, and that the principal determiner of meaning in language must always be context, the way in which it is structured.

The second aspect of language that surfaces as a major preoccupation in "Private Parts" is its evocative power. Words are presented as sensuous, attractive in and of

themselves, regardless of whether their meanings are understood. In the absence of a signified, the signifier itself seems inherently, aesthetically desirable. The description of the boy's stay with Uncle Fred and Aunt Lizzie contains the following sentence: "Whenever I think of them, words come to my mind of whose meanings I am not sure, haunting words like 'fustian' and 'coulter,' 'stoup' and 'flitch,' words redolent of another age" (GG 6). The repetition of "words" and the testimony to their potency suggest that the force of language is not limited to its ability to communicate meaning. "Significantly," Lecker writes, "it is *words* which allow him to depart from the present and to enter his tale." The adolescent Moore and his friend Tony become jazz enthusiasts and dream of New Orleans; as a result, they

> were ravished by the American language. Ten-shilling notes became 'bills' and then 'ten-spots'; we longed to taste black-eyed peas, chitlins, collard greens, and grits; we would have given years of our lives to smoke a reefer, meet a viper.
>
> (GG 46-47)

In the passage cited above, the recollection of words associated with the past trigger the narrator's memory--they serve as a technical device to move from the present into the past. Here, the impression is of the richness and variety of language, the suggestion of the promise of the future (a promise which is subsequently undercut by the account of the narrator's trip to Louisiana). Words, then, are characterized

in "Private Parts" by their evocative influence, whether or not they are precisely defined. The impact of language rests not only in the sign, but in the signifier alone, in its sound, weight and texture: "Private Parts" consistently affirms the aesthetics of the word.

One final point I would like to make about language here is that it is shown to be powerful. The vehicle for Moore's escape (from adolescence, his mother, the Old World) is art, his writing. Long before this liberation, however, he recognizes the potential of language as a weapon against his mother. Having seen a film on yaws at the church, the young protagonist researches the subject and presents the family with the results of his investigations:

> "I was reading about yaws today in the library," I said.
> "Poor things," said my mother. ...
> "It seems," I said, "that yaws is a form of venereal disease."
> A cup clinked on a saucer in the silence.
> "If unchecked," I said, "it has much the same effects as syphilis and..."
> "*Cake?*" said my mother. "It's got raisins in it."
> "and like syphilis is caused..."
> "*Would anyone like another cup of tea?*"
>
> (GG 37)

Clearly, yaws are all right in a missionary's film, but not as a topic of conversation. The boy exploits his mother's prudishness by providing her with information she would much prefer to ignore:

> I started to carry the fight to my mother by introducing the unspeakable under the guise of

> religious knowledge. At the tea-table I would offer such topics as the derivation of the word 'bugger' from 'Bulgarian' explaining to her the manichean background...
>
> (GG 36)

The first sentence makes explicit the use of language as a weapon and establishes that such usage becomes frequent. As the protagonist grows from childhood to adolescence and his understanding of language increases, so do the attacks on his mother; this process is reinforced by the satirical rendering of the mother's dialogue.

Early on in the novella, then, the protagonist perceives language as a practical means of rebellion against his mother. At the same time, he escapes the repressive atmosphere of the family home by reading widely and dreaming of becoming famous; he and Tony "would write our names large on the map's white spaces" (GG 77). Ultimately, Moore flees to the world of Canadian academe and ends up scarcely less anguished, it seems, than he was in his "tormented" youth. Language has not resolved his problem. But what *is* his problem? There is, of course, the problem of sex, a major preoccupation of the novella: the opposition between the Spirit and the Flesh, largely as a result of the tyrannical influence of his mother, has never been happily resolved in Moore. More than this, though, "Private Parts" is about anxiety, and the root of this anxiety is Bobby.

At the end of the first section of Part One Uncle Fred persuades Bobby to swim and then runs off with his clothes:

> Bobby is making his angry face and shouting angry-sounding things. He is pointing towards the yard and he is crying. I cannot understand a word. I feel guilty and sorry but it is one of Uncle Fred's jokes and Uncle Fred is grown-up and preaches and shouts at policemen.
>
> I am staring at Bobby's thing. It hangs down from a bush of black hair and it reaches nearly to his knee. It is as fat as my arm. His ball-bag is huge like the Hereford in the dark stall. I stare and stare.
>
> (GG 11)

The sight of Bobby's penis will haunt Moore for years to come, but it is not this sight alone that traumatizes the protagonist. Bobby's rage alarms the boy because the "angry-sounding things" make no sense.

Two pages previous to this episode we are provided with a description of Bobby which begins as follows:

> Uncle Fred employed an idiot, the son of a widow woman who lived in the village. The idiot's name was Bobby. I was frightened of him because of his potato face and I could never understand anything he said.
>
> (GG 9)

In the final sentence above, "because" not only signals a causal relationship between Bobby's appearance and the boy's fear; it also suggests an association between that fear and the statement that the child "could never understand anything he said." The boy's fear of the inability to communicate is underlined when he sees Bobby naked and shouting: "I cannot understand a word." Bobby is an imbalance: he is all Flesh

and no Spirit, all World and no Word. Lecker argues of the novella in general that "all this attention to penises speaks equally for Moore's attachment to his pen" (Lecker 96). Bobby is a metaphor for Moore's most profound anxiety: the fear of wordlessness, or, as Rooke describes it, "the speechlessness against which writing struggles, the nightmare at the centre of all anecdote" (Rooke 243).

Moore's relationship to language is characterized by paradox: he both delights in and feels betrayed by it. It is the means of his liberation from an oppressive past, and the source of the fear that torments him. At the same time, through his emphasis on the contextual workings of language, the functions of letter and word, and the power of linguistic constructions, Metcalf repeatedly asserts that Moore and "Private Parts" are nothing more (or less) than verbal arrangements. While it is neither postmodern nor metafictional in any strict sense of the words, Metcalf's continual insistence on the form and function of language, and in particular the materiality of language, complements the self-conscious narration of his text. It consistently undermines the illusion of realism by pointing again and again to the artificiality of its constructs.

* * *

The novella closes with Moore's purchase of a sextant, and there has been some critical disagreement about the implications of this conclusion. According to Cameron, the instrument is "a phallic symbol, a signifier of desire," "a symbolic substitute for his penis," "an unconscious link to his past." Cameron also notes "the trace of *sex* in the word, and that it is an instrument of *journeying*" that measures distance with mirrors. "The final sentence," he writes, "reiterates the dominant motifs of uncertainty and doubt: 'I'm not quite sure how it's supposed to work'" (JM 101). Garebian also recognizes the connotations of journeys and directions; he sees the ending as hopeful and Moore as "a bruised survivor: uncertain of his final fate but no longer a depressed victim of puritan anxiety. His sensuousness is alive and well, and the tortured images have been displaced" (Garebian 130). Lecker, on the other hand, stresses the final sentence and concludes that "the instrument will not guide Moore into the future. [...] Nothing will change" (Lecker 96).

Certainly Moore's final statement ("I'm not quite sure how it's supposed to work") does not inspire exuberant optimism, and it is worth noting that Moore's response to the sextant is not unlike his experience of language. Moore is looking for a certain kind of fountain pen when he sees the sextant. He deems it necessary to "smuggle it into the house" and hides it "under papers in a drawer," all of which suggests subversion

and recalls his early experiences with art and sex: once again, he is concealing his treasures from family. The strong sense of sensual and aesthetic enjoyment in the last paragraph corresponds to the way in which language is presented throughout the novella, as something to be appreciated and respected for the intricacy of its workings. Moore may not be quite sure how language works, but nor can anyone else; his obvious fascination with its possibilities is what may guide him into the future.

"Private Parts: A Memoir" is a fundamentally disruptive (and self-disruptive) text: it challenges at every turn traditional assumptions about reading and writing. The parody of forms and the title itself call into question the status of the novella and show that it does and does not fit the the categories it invokes. This duality suggests the limitations of literary classification. The frequent use of intertextuality demonstrates the paradoxical relation between the text and its predecessors: it highlights both the interdependence of artistic works, and the independence of the text. Furthermore, the omission of references to contemporary writing suggests a parallel between "Private Parts" as the product of some kind of literary or artistic tradition, and Moore as a creation of his own past. The narration of the novella, with all its interruptions and inconsistencies, undermines traditional faith in the authority of the writer

and draws attention to the act of reading as an interactive process involving reader, writer, and text. It emphasises repeatedly the way in which language is manipulated to create certain effects, and thus deconstructs the notion of representational fiction. Finally, the examination of the physical structure of language itself manifests a profound concern with the nature and function of language, of fiction, and of communication.

CONCLUSION

> Canada's own particular moment of cultural history does seem to make it ripe for the paradoxes of postmodernism, by which I mean those contradictory acts of establishing and then undercutting prevailing values and conventions in order to provoke a questioning, a challenging of 'what goes without saying' in our culture. Whether postmodern writers be Canadian or Latin American, British, American, Italian, or German, they are always in a sense 'agents provocateurs'-- taking pot-shots at the culture of which they know they are unavoidably a part but that they still wish to criticize. This almost inevitably puts the postmodern writer into a marginal or 'ex-centric' position with regard to the central or dominant culture...
>
> (Hutcheon 3)

John Metcalf is not a "postmodern writer" exactly, and I hope that the preceding chapters have shown that such designations as "the modernist writer Metcalf" (Nischik 176) are not particularly useful either. Hutcheon's description of postmodern writers here, though, is most pertinent. "The Teeth of My Father," "The Eastmill Reception Centre" and "Private Parts: A Memoir" all "[establish] and then [undercut]" common assumptions about truth and fiction, the authority of the writer, and the nature and function of language. Metcalf's own status as a British expatriate and Canadian citizen reinforces his cultural 'ex-centricity,' and his non-fiction critiques of writing in Canada certainly smack of the "agent provocateur." More important, though, than his nationality or his reputation as an agitator is the fact that

John Metcalf is a master of the contemporary short story whose work has been oddly misconstrued by many critics. Much of the criticism of Metcalf's stories is informed by the idea that his stories are elegant and rather poetic renderings of the usual themes. There is some truth to this, but it ignores what is for me the crux of Metcalf's most interesting fiction, which he explained in an interview with Geoff Hancock in 1981: "Of course, I know what the story's 'about' before I start. That's more or less irrelevant. What the story's really about is the operation of language" (Hancock 118).

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