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# A Handbook To Raymond Knister's Longer Prose Fiction

Joy Rachel Kuropatwa

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A HANDBOOK TO RAYMOND KNISTER'S LONGER PROSE FICTION

by  
Joy R. Kuropatwa

Department of English

Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Graduate Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario  
April, 1985

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virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up a dozen of them. It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and determined to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.<sup>3</sup>

Livesay continues by quoting Knister's 1926 preface to "Windfalls for Cider," a projected volume of poetry, and notes, "here is Raymond Knister, speaking of his aims as a writer":

Life is likely to be troublesome at times. Let us veil it, they say, in sonorous phrases and talk about birds and flowers and dreams. Birds and flowers and dreams are real as sweating men and swilling pigs. But the feeling about them is not always so real any more when it gets into words. Because of that, it would be good just to place them before the reader, just let the reader picture them with the utmost economy and clearness, and be moved by little things and great. Let him snivel, or be uncaring, or make his own poems from undeniable glimpses of the world.

It would be good for the flowers and birds and dreams, and good for us. We would love them better, and be more respectful. And we might feel differently about many other common things if we saw them clearly enough. In the end we in Canada here might have the courage of our experience and speak according to it only. And when we trust surely, see directly enough, life, ourselves, we may have our own Falstaffs and Shropshire lads and Anna Kareninas.

We may climb ladders, and our apples will be hand-picked, and make a more lasting vintage. (Livesay, p. 80)

Livesay pairs quotations from prefatory works by Anderson and Knister in order to demonstrate the influence of mid-west American writing on

of experienced reality.

This thesis, as a handbook, introduces the technical and thematic range of Knister's novels and novellas, published and unpublished; although Knister was a leading Canadian writer of the twenties, no discussion of his longer prose fiction currently exists.

This thesis is dedicated to

F.Z. Kuropatwa

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The knowledge and encouragement of Professor James Reaney made the writing of this thesis possible. The time and patience of both Professor Reaney and Professor D. Hair, in supervising this thesis, is gratefully acknowledged. I would like to express a special thanks for the generosity, in the form of the Colin Inkster Memorial Award, of St. John's College, The University of Manitoba. Mrs. M. Grace is thanked for courteously sharing memories of Raymond Knister. Imogen Knister Givens kindly granted interviews, patiently answered questions, and generously permitted quotation from her father's work. William Murtha kindly permitted quotation from unpublished letters between Thomas Murtha and Raymond Knister. The co-operation of archivists at McMaster University, Queen's University, and Victoria University is very much appreciated. Z. Stockwell, of Weldon Library, The University of Western Ontario, made easy the search for nineteen-twenties reviews and editions. A special thanks to friends at Brescia College, The University of Western Ontario, for encouragement and interest. Thanks to Dr. J.R. Struthers for proof-reading, and Dr. D.L. Hudecki, for discussion of aesthetics. Raymond Knister repeatedly recognizes, in published and unpublished work, the continuity between realities tangible and intangible: thanks to Patricia Black for the typing that enabled this project to take tangible form.



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- Untitled 33 page short story (TS) (Knister Family Papers)
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Chapter V "Innocent Man"

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"Via Faust" (TS)

## Chapter I Introduction: "The Courage of Our Experience"

John Raymond Knister was born in "1899, in a farmhouse near the village of Ruthven, North Essex County, Ontario." Knister "read voluminously," and began writing poetry as a teenager. By the early twenties, Knister was also writing prose fiction, and this work was heavily influenced by the realistic and regional writing of the mid-west America of Knister's day. The writing of Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Carl Sandburg, and Ruth Suckow can be seen as influencing Knister's work. Questions of predisposition aside, there are biographical reasons for Knister's attention to the work of mid-west American writers.

Between 1922 and 1923 Knister wrote "The Old Gestures," a short story which, in expanded form, became his first novel, "Group Portrait" (Waddington, pp. 179-180). "Group Portrait" was completed in Iowa, where Knister had the chance to work in an encouraging milieu:

Knister began his work with The Midland in October, 1923 as the Associate Editor. This was a special new position representing a kind of scholarship Frederick [editor of The Midland] had created for young writers of exceptional promise. Ruth Suckow had been the first appointed to the position a year before. (Waddington, p. 179)

Knister's early work reveals a fascination with the familiar and, in going to Iowa, Knister was entering a milieu in which fictional

representation of everyday life and immediate surroundings was considered valid and vital. In 1923, Knister described

the group about the "Midland" [sic] magazine . . . . But the word "group" perhaps gives an erroneous notion, for the books of these men are assuredly not run in a mould, but express freely the individuality of their writers. These are perhaps a group, only in the effort of striving to interpret their region and to encourage each other in the achieving of that aim.<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1923, Knister praises the regionalism encouraged by The Midland for not interfering with the "individuality" of writers.

Knister's remarks also reflect an appreciation of writers who strive "to interpret their region" in their work. Attention to the realities of time and place marks Knister's eight works of longer prose fiction, which in order of composition are: "Group Portrait," "Turning Loam," White Narcissus, "Innocent Man," "Cab Driver," My Star Predominant, "Peaches, Peaches" and "Soil in Smoke."

Dorothy Livesay points to continuity between the regionalist writing of Sherwood Anderson and Knister, and asks her reader to consider adjacent samples of the work of the two writers. First, Livesay cites a passage from the opening section, "The Book of the Grotesque," of Anderson's 1919 collection of short stories, Winesburg, Ohio:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as truth. Man made the truth himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful. The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his books. I will not try to tell you of all of them. There was the truth of

virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up a dozen of them. It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and determined to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.<sup>3</sup>

Livesay continues by quoting Knister's 1926 preface to "Windfalls for Cider," a projected volume of poetry, and notes, "here is Raymond Knister, speaking of his aims as a writer":

Life is likely to be troublesome at times. Let us veil it, they say, in sonorous phrases and talk about birds and flowers and dreams. Birds and flowers and dreams are real as sweating men and swilling pigs. But the feeling about them is not always so real any more when it gets into words. Because of that, it would be good just to place them before the reader, just let the reader picture them with the utmost economy and clearness, and be moved by little things and great. Let him snivel, or be uncaring, or make his own poems from undeniable glimpses of the world.

It would be good for the flowers and birds and dreams, and good for us. We would love them better, and be more respectful. And we might feel differently about many other common things if we saw them clearly enough. In the end we in Canada here might have the courage of our experience and speak according to it only. And when we trust surely, see directly enough, life, ourselves, we may have our own Falstaffs and Shropshire lads and Anna Kareninas.

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(Livesay, p. 80)

Livesay pairs quotations from prefatory works by Anderson and Knister in order to demonstrate the influence of mid-west American writing on

Knister's work:

It was interesting that whereas the father was an experimental farmer, sending his soy beans to win a prize at the Chicago exhibitions, the son brought his experimental writings to Chicago where he hoped to meet those new realists, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Ruth Suckow. Hemingway in the early twenties was as yet unheard from, but the realist movement in fiction and the imagist movement in poetry . . . made a deep impression . . . . He went to Iowa and got editorial work on The Midland. (Livesay, p. 79)

Anderson, Sandburg, and Suckow are all regionalist writers whose work reflects, and is deeply rooted in, place. Livesay's placing of passages, from Winesburg, Ohio and "Windfalls for Cider," side by side emphasizes the regionalist sensibility of both Anderson and Knister. Possibly the "wine" of Anderson's title refers to the distillation of the varied truths, as Anderson implies in his preface, of the lives lived in Winesburg. Similarly, Knister's title, as he explains in his preface, refers to the "vintage" that "we in Canada here" might distill by having "the courage of our experience" and so "speak according to it only." If art ferments local fruits of the earth, the result is worth experiencing.

Evidence suggests that Knister particularly appreciated Anderson's work in Winesburg, Ohio. In two stories in Winesburg, Ohio, Anderson places Winesburg on the map. In about the middle of the volume, Anderson refers to "Lake Erie eighteenth miles to the north,"<sup>4</sup> and later mentions that

For days the weather had been bitter cold with a high wind blowing down on the town from Lake Erie,

eighteen miles to the north, but on that night the wind had died away and a new moon made the night unusually lovely. (Winesburg, Ohio, p. 218)

Not only does Anderson repeat that "Winesburg" is eighteen miles south of Lake Erie, but he also names his protagonist George Willard, and a town called Willard is actually found on the map where Winesburg is said to be. In Knister's novella, "Peaches, Peaches," the setting is primarily a farm found "by the southern tip of Lake Erie"<sup>5</sup> and about "fifteen miles" from "an inlet called Rond Eau" (p. 50).

According to Knister's description, the farm would be in the area of Cedar Springs or Blenheim. On the map, a straight line drawn across Lake Erie, between Willard, Ohio and Blenheim, Ontario, intersects the international boundary, which more or less halves the lake, exactly where it angles southward to follow the shape of the lake. In other words, Blenheim and Willard virtually mirror each other's geographical location across Lake Erie. In part, the explanation for this is that Anderson and Knister were both writing about the regions they were familiar with. Yet, if more than coincidence is at work, it may be that Knister here provides an oblique hint of an impulse toward a Canadian adaptation of the evocative, regionally-rooted writing of Anderson.

Knister worked on the novel White Narcissus between 1925 and 1927, and during this time he expressed interest in the work of two other regionalist writers of the mid-west: Ernest Hemingway and Ruth Suckow. The early fiction of Hemingway, like the work of Suckow, derives power from the immediacy with which time and place are



presented.

In a 1926 letter to Ernest Walsh, editor of the American expatriate magazine This Quarter, Hemingway reports having "not yet read" the "Knister prose" in This Quarter. (Presumably Hemingway's reference is to Knister's short story, "The Fate of Mrs. Lucier," which appeared in the same issue of This Quarter as work by others, including himself, whom Hemingway mentions in his letter.)<sup>6</sup> A short story by both Hemingway and Knister appeared in each of the first two issues of This Quarter. In a 1925 letter, Walsh advises Knister,

Your stuff is real. The story we took. Keep at it. Let's see more of your things. Poems not so good. Dig all you can out of your surroundings. Don't play safe. Try anything. You may manage something really big if you risk failure in trying. Study our men. Note Hemingway...<sup>7</sup>

Knister had been taking literary notice of his surroundings for some time, but after his own fashion he did "Note Hemingway"; Knister discusses the prose of Hemingway in an unpublished omnibus book review:

His first book, In Our Time, consisted of tiny short stories about life in Michigan and chapter-heads on war incidents. They form pictures with a clearness and swiftness which it would be hard to rival. His next book was a funny one, The Torrents of Spring, a take-off on Sherwood Anderson and others of the modern school. Now comes The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway's first full-length novel, about a transplanted set of cosmopolites-- Americans, English, and foreigners of the "Count-no-account" type. They are interesting

because they are real; their talk is some of the realést ever written.<sup>8</sup>

Knister notes Hemingway's technique of creating "pictures" and emphasizes Hemingway's ability to evoke the "real," whether the reality in question is that of cosmopolite speech or Michigan life.

In the story "The Three Day Blow"--which is in the 1925 In Our Time--Hemingway describes two young friends, who are only slightly drunk, discussing literature:

"Yup. That's the one where they go to bed every night with the naked sword between them."

"That's a good book, Wemedge."

"It's a swell book. What I couldn't ever understand was what good the sword would do. It would have to stay edge up all the time because if it went over flat you could roll right over it and it wouldn't make any trouble."

"It's a symbol," Bill said.

"Sure," said Nick, "but it isn't practical."

"Did you ever read 'Fortitude?'"

"It's fine," Nick said. "That's a real book. That's where his old man is after him all the time. Have you got any more by Walpole?"

"The Dark Forest," Bill said. "It's about Russia."

"What does he know about Russia?" Nick asked.

"I don't know. You can't ever tell about those guys. Maybe he was there when he was a boy. He's got a lot of dope on it."

"I'd like to meet him," Nick said.

"I'd like to meet Chesterton," Bill said.

"I wish he was here now," Nick said. "We'd take him fishing to the 'Voix tomorrow."<sup>9</sup>

Hemingway's protagonist, Nick, has little use for a symbol that is not "practical" and wants to know if an author who writes about a given place has ever actually been there. Nick's acute sense of the here-and-now--he would like to take an author his friend mentions

fishing--perhaps exemplifies what Anderson refers to in speaking of "telling . . . stories" as they are actually told "in the towns and villages" of "the middle west."<sup>10</sup> Hemingway's passage similarly implies that the test of fiction is its relatedness to the here-and-now.

Two works of Suckow's are in Knister's library--Country People (1924) and Iowa Interiors (1926).<sup>11</sup> The titles indicate the regionalist approach of both works. Country People is a novel that traces the marriage of August and Emma Kaetterhenry. August is a farmer, hard-working, well-meaning, slightly stingy, bent on material success and the smooth running of the family farm. He can be thought of as a rather less melodramatic version of the character of Caleb Gare in Ostenso's Wild Geese. In Country People, the emphasis Suckow places on the physical environment parallels the approach Knister takes in his longer prose fiction. Suckow's novel opens,

Some of the best land in the country, people said, was right here in Richland Township. The soil in Wapsipinicon County was a little inclined to be sandy, didn't bring quite the price of the very best Iowa farming-land; but this stretch in here between Richland and "Wapsie" didn't give the farmers much chance for complaint.<sup>12</sup>

Knister's first novel, "Group Portrait," similarly opens with a description of the ground of material reality, before such less tangible realities as character become the focus of attention. In an extant fragment of his foreword to "Group Portrait," Knister writes, "I want to amass an environment and characters which shall give off

as you say, the action . . . . Or, to depend on the picture and make little in the way of story necessary."<sup>13</sup> Knister and Suckow both veer away from making action central in their fiction.

The second Suckow book in Knister's library, Iowa Interiors, is a collection of short stories. As the title hints, the work presents Iowa as a physical environment and includes psychological portraits. (In this connection, it is interesting that a Knister short story published in This Quarter, "The Fate of Mrs. Lucier," has been described as "the first Canadian story to employ the technique of interior monologue.")<sup>14</sup> A sense of place informs Suckow's stories in Iowa Interiors. For example, the story "Renters" opens,

Crops were looking fine around Concordia this year. Oats were rather light, but corn was already tasselling out in early July. June had been hot, with plenty of rain; muggy, steamy "corn weather." Grass was rich and thick; weeds along the roadsides--milkweed, sweet clover, ragweed, thistles--were a perfect thicket.<sup>15</sup>

In referring to crops, weather, and weeds, Suckow establishes physical setting, and by implication celebrates the environment. The details of an "ordinary" environment are worth recording because they merit attention and interest. Knister also gives details of the physical environment in his longer prose fiction, but perhaps goes beyond Suckow in making described environments immediate, going so far, for example, in White Narcissus as seeming to fuse character mood with perception of the environment.

In his 1926 review of Iowa Interiors, Knister notes:

the subjects Miss Suckow finds in Iowa . . . show her more concerned with the actual, the quotidian, with what can be identified, named, understood--but also, felt--than with . . . more dramatically emotional crises . . . . 16

In praising the way that Suckow deals with the "quotidian" or commonplace, and in referring to Suckow's treatment of realities both "felt" and visible, Knister indicates his own understanding of regionalism. The title of Knister's review is "The Interior of America," and it, even more than the title Iowa Interiors, points to both the inclusion of the psychological in Iowa Interiors, and the fact that Iowa, as part of the middle west, represents the "interior" or heartland of America. 17

Suckow's novel The Bonney Family (1928) also appeared in Knister's lifetime, and has affinities with Knister's expressed literary interests. Firstly, the novel is intensely rooted in the here-and-now, and in part the opening paragraph reads rather like a Knister poem, evoking the same sort of sensuous immediacy and celebration of everyday reality as, for example, Knister's poem "White Cat." Suckow's novel opens,

It was a summer afternoon. The day had begun with a thick crust of dew over the grass when Sarah went out after breakfast to pick the nasturtiums. Then, when she sank her hands beneath the petals--velvety, dusky red and orange and yellow--bright drops shook off upon her fingers, and the pale green stems; snapping freshly, were wet. 18

Apart from the intense vitality of ordinary experience which Suckow's image conveys, the opening paragraph of the novel introduces the

11

Bonney family. The novel has four parts: the first part introduces the Bonney family, the second characterizes the elder son, the third the elder daughter, and the final section describes the dissolution of the nuclear Bonney family. As the structure of the work indicates, the novel focuses on the Bonneys, but in the course of the story Suckow creates an opportunity to have a minor character make a remark that evokes her view of current literary opinions. A young college instructor of English explains, "I'm damned. I mentioned Sherwood Anderson right out in my classes" (p. 249).

Anderson "began to write . . . with the encouragement of Carl Sandburg."<sup>19</sup> In 1926, Knister described the effect of hearing Sandburg's poetry read aloud as being the evocation of "daily life" and "vision":

and one knows that man must go on exploring his many provinces, that his only hope is a truthful and honest search for beauty in what experience is given him, in daily life and vision.<sup>20</sup>

There is evidence that this instance of Knister's praise for Sandburg's work is more than a nod of acknowledgement in passing. Knister's reading list indicates that, between 1921 and 1922, he read Sandburg's Cornhuskers,<sup>21</sup> a volume of poetry which appeared in 1918. In Knister's poem, "Corn Husking," the "cornstalks bow with laughter."<sup>22</sup> In Sandburg's "Laughing Corn," which is in Cornhuskers, the corn is associated with "a conquering laughter."<sup>23</sup> Whereas Sandburg's rather brief poem ends with a reference to "the farmhouse" where "the farmer and his wife" may "talk things over together," in

Knister's longer poem characters speak while actually working at corn husking. While Sandburg leaves the actual work of corn husking off-stage, it is central in Knister's poem. In this sense Knister's poem begins where Sandburg's ends, and Knister's choice of title may reflect a desire to acknowledge such continuity. In the longer poem "Corn Husking," Knister weaves the patterns of speech with the rhythms of work, and the poem includes powerful evocation of the physical environment.

Sandburg's poems "were usually short and laconic and colloquial," and "celebrated the clangour of Chicago, the sunlit prairie, the simple man" (Cunliffe, p. 246); if Chicago is Sandburg's city, his work

aimed at catching the atmosphere of the central region of which it was the capital. Sandburg . . . tried to answer the great American . . . conundrum-- that of making the ordinary extraordinary, of plucking significance out of common events. (Cunliffe, p. 245)

The interest in "making the ordinary extraordinary" that Cunliffe detects in Sandburg's work strikes the keynote of regionalism; and Knister's interest in Sandburg's work at least in part stems from Sandburg's regionalism:

Had we the courage of our experience, we might have produced a Burns; by which I mean a poet drawing his inspiration from the soil. Carl Sandburg finds beauty and majesty in Chicago, but he was not born there. His very name [sic] I feel sure, arouses a shudder among my readers. That is why we have no Burns, no Sandburg; the fallacy that only certain

traditionally sanctified objects are poetical would make progress impossible. Nothing, not poetry or dreams, can exist except on the basis of reality. As long as we flinch from contact with the actual, we shall go without great poetry, and our verses will become more and more nearly dead matter.<sup>24</sup>

In his 1926 preface to "Windfalls for Cider," Knister refers to the possibility of "we in Canada" having "the courage of our experience" -- a phrase Knister also uses in his 1928 remarks about Sandburg.

Knister's expression implies an underlying view of reality, for to have "the courage of our experience" is to acknowledge more than physical or material reality. The reality of geographical place provides the ground for beginning to write of "reality" or, in Knister's words, the "experience" of "daily life and vision."

Dorothy Livesay identifies, as Knister's aesthetic, his statement that "'Poetry is to make things real--those of the imagination, and those of the tangible world.'"<sup>25</sup> (This remark is from Knister's 1927 essay, "The Poetry of Archibald Lampman.")<sup>26</sup>

As Livesay points out in her review essay, "Knister's Stories,"

whereas Knister sought for a simple realistic effect he possessed, in addition, an intensity and sensitivity by which he was able to make the ordinary extraordinary. (p. 81)

As Livesay suggests, Knister's fiction can "make the ordinary extraordinary," and Knister does this by assimilating the things of the "imagination, and those of the tangible world."

In an unpublished series of notes entitled "Notes for Novel"



(Group Portrait)," which would have been written in 1922 or 1923,

Knister writes:

Object of art, and of art of fiction is evocation of emotion. For this, the best form is the most successful, and therefore none is prove [sic] intrinsically better than another.<sup>27</sup>

Knister later expanded his definition of the "object of art." The conclusion of Knister's "Purposes of Fiction," an article published in late 1926, reads:

when Conrad scrutinized human character in its various national and individual characteristics, he did so with the greatest care, . . . in the interests of truth for the creation of beauty.

Through forms of beauty to share his sense of mystery, terror, delight or ugliness with his fellow-creatures, was the aim which Conrad confessed, which he gave as the aim of the artist in all times and all mediums. To make you see, to make you feel, and to realize the solidarity of all created things under the sun.<sup>28</sup>

While Knister describes, in the notes toward his first novel, the aim of art as the "evocation of emotion," by 1926 he implies that the "aim of the artist" is a matter of making people "see . . . feel, and . . . realize" the relatedness of experience. Knister never deserted his allegiance to regionalism, but his expressed sense of the complexity of reality increased, and his longer prose fiction increasingly assimilated smoothly the representation of material reality and such less seizable realities as character. In the process of evoking realities tangible and intangible in his work, Knister could look to the models that regionalist writers provided,

but Knister's fiction and non-fiction also suggest the presence of other influences.

Dorothy Livesay, herself a poet, writes of Knister,

For too long he has been known only . . . as an imagist poet who came from an Ontario farm to make his way in the twenties magazines, This Quarter, Paris, and The Midland, Iowa. His chief desire, however, was to write fiction. ("Knister's Stories," p. 79)

In his 1926 article, "On Reading Aloud," Knister refers to imagism and speaks of the continuity between poetry and prose fiction. In the opening paragraph of his article, Knister writes that "poems were made not to convince us by their logic, but to move us by their music, or by the images they call up." Knister adds:

By their images. This is a comparatively new conception in poetry. It is perhaps a dozen or fifteen years ago that a small band of poets, some American and some English, adopted imagism . . . as a creed. This is not expressing it too strongly. The creed was precisely and definitely formulated. Nowadays all poets agree that these rules regarding the use of the exact word, the keeping of the eye on the object, and so forth, are a part of all good writing, prose and verse. But as for making the image the whole poem, that is not accepted by anyone, though many fine poems resulted from such usage. (p. 14, col. 1)

His praise for the use of the "exact word" and the "keeping of the eye on the object" is more than a matter of a nod in passing. In the essay "Canadian Literati," Knister describes himself as spending the winter of 1921 writing "farm stories, and also thirty or forty farm poems, with the eye on the object."<sup>29</sup>

Harry Levin notes a similar feature in the prose of a contemporary of Knister's; Knister was born in 1899, Ernest Hemingway in 1898. Levin states that "Hemingway manages to sustain his reputation for concreteness by an exploring eye for the incidental detail,"<sup>30</sup> and explains:

By presenting a succession of images, each of which has its brief moment when it commands the reader's undivided attention, he achieves his special vividness and fluidity. (p. 159)

Levin observes in the course of discussing Hemingway's prose that "It is not surprising that Hemingway's verse, published by Poetry in 1923, is recognizably imagistic in character" (p. 160). Knister's verse was published by Poetry in 1924. And Knister states that he writes both stories and poems "with the eye on the object." One can argue that Knister, as Levin argues in the case of Hemingway, retains the habit of the writer of imagistic poetry, or the habit of making significant or central use of images, in writing prose fiction.

In 1926, Knister wrote that the techniques of precise diction and keen observation, if originally recommended by the imagist poets, "are a part of all good writing, prose and verse." Knister reiterates this sense of a continuity between "prose and verse" when he writes that imagism "is more limiting than ever the sonnet was" because if "each poem is to be a single image, it may be perfectly satisfying as such, and yet in many cases fail to move the reader"; for Knister the criterion for poetry is that it "move the reader" whether "it is printed as prose or not." ("On Reading Aloud," p. 14, cols 1-2).

In the essay, "Katherine Mansfield," Knister comments that the "world" of Mansfield's fiction

might be taken as the vision of a child seeing every detail and thrust back again and again to surface observation by the enigmatic character of the things it sees. It is a strange world of . . . stars that say, 'Let's throw something,' palms like 'immense untidy birds' . . . of tiny owls perched and calling, 'More pork; more pork,' of lanterns 'burning softly as if for themselves.'<sup>31</sup>

For Knister, the "vision" of Mansfield's fictional world reflects a thirst for "surface observation" that a child, with a consuming curiosity about the wealth of new things to be seen, might have. Knister maintains that Mansfield's fiction presents the "exterior world" as a "child" might see it, with details "recorded for love of themselves" (p. 429).

Presumably Knister appreciated the inclusion in prose fiction of "surface observation" with an accompanying evocation of "the enigmatic character of things"; as Knister explains, after quoting from a Mansfield story, which ends,

Through a big crack in the cement yard a poor looking plant with dull, reddish flowers had pushed its way. I looked at the dead bird again . . . . And that is the first time I remember singing--rather . . . listening to a silent voice, inside a little cage that was me.

The last sentence typifies a common tendency in this and other modern work, to a sort of symbolic imagism. And one still fails to see that it is an improvement on Chekov's somehow mysteriously putting the object or fact before us without symbols of any sort. (p. 434)

Knister relates the effect of what he calls "symbolic imagism" to the presentation of an "object or fact . . . without symbols of any sort," and so implies that, in prose fiction, Mansfield's "symbolic imagism," like Chekhov's approach, presents and celebrates the everyday in and of itself. When Knister praises Chekhov for "putting the object or fact before us without symbols of any sort," he defines a strength of Chekhov's short stories in terms very similar to those he uses to describe the defining characteristic of imagist poetry: the presentation of a "bird or rock or flower or person without comparing it to something else, and without moralizing or generalizing about it" ("On Reading Aloud," p. 14, col. 1). Knister has it that Chekhov, like an imagist poet, can present an everyday "object" as being of sufficient importance to preclude the need of an extraneous or imposed symbolism. And Knister's implication, that the kind of concentrated image of everyday life that imagism specializes in can well make a transfer into prose fiction, agrees with Knister's remark that his poetry consists of "celebrations" of "ploughing, or horses, or bees" ("Canadian Literati," p. 164). To perceive the everyday as worthy of focus is to suggest the inherent value of the everyday, or to celebrate the extraordinary nature of so-called ordinary life. Textual evidence indicates that, in his longer prose fiction, Knister favours the technique of using intensely evocative images, a technique that was already familiar to him from his own writing of poetry.

Knister observes that "Many of us Canadians do not yet realize that poetry must have, or rather has a connection with life."<sup>32</sup> By

the late twenties, Knister was working on two novellas that reflect his interest in the use of images and literature based on experienced realities. "Innocent Man" and "Cab Driver"--the latter became available only in January 1984--are both set in Chicago, where Knister spent the summer of 1924 (after leaving Iowa and before returning to Canada). These works share the inclusion of harsh urban realities and visionary realities. Knister employs different techniques in the two works--"Innocent Man" has a frame narrative, while "Cab Driver" becomes dominated by the metaphorical equation of Chicago and Babylon--but both novellas include images of central importance. In "Innocent Man" and "Cab Driver," images capture sights and sounds that ultimately determine atmosphere and crystallize theme. Knister makes material reality the basis for exploring emotional reality, and images of sense perceptions enable the assimilation of radically different varieties of reality.

A preference for literature that reflects experienced reality underlies Knister's reference to writers "not vigorous enough to deal with experienced reality as a whole" ("Lampman," p. 458). For Knister, Canadian literature "should give a voice to what is actually being lived among us" ("Canadian Letter," p. 379). While Knister calls for Canadian creative writing to reflect everyday reality, he makes it plain that more than material reality is in question. As Livesay notes, for Knister, "poetry is to make things real--those of the imagination, and those of the tangible world" ("Lampman," p. 464). Perhaps it is for this reason--that in literature the tangibles and

the intangibles of reality count--that Knister sees the art of fiction as involving more than accurate reproduction of surface or material reality, or what Knister calls "photographic realism."<sup>33</sup>

The phrase "photographic realism" acquires a special meaning in the context of Knister's non-fiction. Knister remarks, in a letter dated 16 October 1922:

I did not mean to speak from behind the rampart of the dominant (whatever the ultra-intelligentsia may say) cult of realism of a more or less photographic sort.<sup>34</sup>

In his non-fiction, Knister repeatedly reveals a limited interest in a "photographic" type of verisimilitude. As Knister explains in an essay:

realistic expression does not weigh so vastly according to purely literary values. Gun-playing West and North or chimes-auraed cathedral towns may be absurd; but it is not so necessary that art should portray a reality which we can identify without going farther than the window or the mirror, as that it should embody a life of its own. ("Canadian Letter," p. 380)

Knister implies that what he elsewhere calls a "photographic" sort of "realism" would make a poor first priority in a work of literature. When he writes that a work of fiction ought to "embody a life of its own," above and beyond portraying what can be seen "without going farther than the window or the mirror," he implies that there is a possible danger in a runaway predominance of a "realism" that restricts itself to a concern with appearances. It is Knister's chary sense of "realism of a more or less photographic sort," or

predominant portrayal of "a reality which we can identify without going farther than the window or the mirror," that echoes and resonates through, and finally informs, his critical statements about "realism." As the photograph, the window and the mirror reveal only appearances, Knister's point seems to be that a "realism" concerned exclusively with appearances is not really a means of coming to an engagement with reality at all. From here on, the expression "photographic realism" will be used to indicate the sort of "realism" that deals largely if not exclusively with appearances, the sort of realism that Knister implies captures only "a reality which we can identify without going farther than the window or the mirror." In other words, "photographic realism" is that "realism" which evokes the material world.

Knister recounts, in his essay "Canadian Literati," that an

editor would expostulate earnestly with me:  
 "Mr. Knister, you make your people too real.  
 Our readers don't want to read about real things.  
 They want to be amused. Try to put more plot  
 into your stories." ("Canadian Literati," p. 164)

When Knister recalls an editor objecting to the "too real," the implication is that Knister himself has an interest in capturing the "real" in his "stories," or that real things have their place in fiction. Yet when Knister refers to the "real" entering fiction, what he means is not an utter servitude to empirically verifiable detail:

I am only pointing out that we probably will have



to come to grips with reality before we shall have a literature, before Canada will mean something to the Canadian besides his own personal experience. If any Canadian equals Moby Dick . . . there will be no objection from anybody. Or if he can be as Canadian as Poe was American he may create his own world. ("Canadian Literati," pp. 167-168)

If the artist may, according to Knister, legitimately "create his own world," such a world would not necessarily rely upon a "photographic" verisimilitude or semblance of actuality. As the title White Narcissus implies, Knister's sense of the realities to be treated in literature admits the kind of truths that myth and metaphor embody.

From 1929 until the end of his life, Knister wrote longer prose fiction which reflects the cumulative influence of fictional strategies that had interested Knister from the early twenties: regionalism, imagism, inclusion of (without restriction to) photographic realism, and the recognition of tangible and intangible realities. In My Star Predominant, Knister's novel about Keats, images serve structural and thematic purposes. The novella, "Peaches, Peaches," covers parallel seasons of botanical fruition and psychological harvest. Knister's last novel, "Soil in Smoke," as the title suggests, derives energy from movement between material and visionary realities.

The increasing coalescence of the literary influences behind Knister's work becomes apparent in the case of the influence of Goethe. Livesay comments of Knister,

His first literary influences . . . were

those found in the American mid-west. But if I assert that Raymond Knister was strongly influenced by . . . Sherwood Anderson, this is to say that he found in him a confirmation of his own views: start with precise observation, but see behind it into the nature of things. As . . . in . . . Goethe's Confessions, the special quality of the artist is that it is given to him to perceive the metaphysical real--das Ding an Sich. ("Knister's Stories," pp. 79-80)

Knister read Goethe's autobiography early in 1919,<sup>35</sup> and in his autobiography Goethe recalls being inspired by poetry "to go out on the image-hunt"<sup>36</sup> and consequently becoming

extremely attentive to the small life of nature . . . I accustomed myself to see in them a significance, which inclined now toward the symbolical, now toward the allegorical . . . as intuition, feeling, or reflection had the preponderance. (p. 300)

Goethe's description of his ability to find the "symbolical" in the "small life of nature"--which includes "gnats" (p. 300)--when out on an "image-hunt," relates to Knister's description of the effect of the literary approach he attributes to Chekov, or the ability to evoke symbolic meaning without departing from the nature of everyday reality.

"Via Faust," which appears to be an outline for a novel, is "possibly the last thing"<sup>37</sup> that Knister wrote. The outline describes four stages in the life of a writer: "Via Faust" opens, "Theme, to Faust and back. Begin with life out of the soil." Initially, there is the "sensitive adolescent soul learning about life," and the "end to be kept in view is the formation of this character, probably a

great poet."<sup>38</sup> In the "Second Stage," the protagonist writes "novels, realistic," and his primary concern is "his personal relations." By the "Third Stage," a time of "intellectual" advance, he notices that the "greatest writers" move "away from realism"--and, in the case of Goethe, "to creation . . . cerebral more than instinctive" ("Via Faust," p. 1). The outline of the final "Fourth Stage" includes no mention of "realism" or any other literary category, but the protagonist's "philosophy becomes that of a good fighter, active and passive." In the final stage, the protagonist "Returns once more to earth, the instinctive" ("Via Faust," p. 2).

While the final literary opinions of the protagonist of "Via Faust" remain tantalizingly indefinite, the literary development of the protagonist of "Via Faust" describes a circle, beginning with the "instinctive" and finally returning to it. The point of having a loop that begins and ends with the instinctive possibly is that the protagonist--who ends with a recognition of the "earth" or "the instinctive"--comes to a full recognition of the richness of everyday life, as embodied by the "earth" or his physical environment. His detachment from earthly or material reality presumably teaches him the extent to which reality is not entirely quantifiable or visible. Goethe's Faust travels to paradise to discover the ultimate meaning of earthly reality;<sup>39</sup> the protagonist of "Via Faust" follows Faust's road or route of detachment from material reality in order to return to earth with an increased understanding of the richness of the meaning of earthly reality.

In terms of Knister's work, "Via Faust" implies the possible limitations that "photographic realism" might present to Knister. If Chekhov's approach or Mansfield's "symbolic imagism" can evoke a sense of the nature of reality, "photographic realism" can give a sense only of the appearance of reality. Knister notes, in the course of discussing Katherine Mansfield's work,

the principle which Goethe enunciated: 'All that happens is a symbol and, by representing itself perfectly, it reveals the significance of all else.' Goethe did not create a form of the short story to illustrate this principle. But Chekhov modulated one which did, perfectly. And for Katherine Mansfield and others who succeed Chekhov, their task has been immeasurably simplified. ("Mansfield," p. 428)

Knister bases his admiration of Chekhov on the perceived ability of Chekhov to evoke the magic inherent in real life and ordinary things. The reference to Goethe again reveals Knister's appreciation of Goethe's ability--an ability Goethe himself associates with the "image-hunt"--to perceive the things of ordinary life as in and of themselves having significance.

Knister's work repeatedly reveals an impulse to write fiction based on, if not subservient to, the material conditions of experienced reality. By 1930, Sinclair Lewis won the Nobel Prize for literature, an event Knister was aware of,<sup>40</sup> Lewis was the first North American to win the Nobel Prize for literature, and such recognition could have been encouraging to Knister; who as early as 1923 described Lewis as being, like Anderson, a writer of the "Middle

West" ("Middle West in New Books," p. 7). In his 1926 "The Why of Realism," Knister suggests that if Lewis's Main Street is not an "exact . . . picture" of "village life," the work is "a novel attempting to impart truth in a living form."<sup>41</sup> An Iowa illustrator of Lewis's 1920 novel, Main Street, possibly indicates the mood of the mid-west regionalist artist of the era.

The painter Grant Wood (1891-1942) is perhaps best known for such works as "American Gothic" (1930) and "Daughters of Revolution" (1932).<sup>42</sup> Yet Wood "created nine large drawings to be reproduced as full-page illustrations for a . . . publication of Main Street."<sup>43</sup> These illustrations were successful insofar as Lewis "wished to buy two of the original drawings" (Dennis, p. 241).

In the "summers of 1932 and 1933, Grant Wood created the Stone City Colony and Art School located not far from the farm where he was born"; "Stone City is a . . . village along the Wapsipinicon River 26 miles from Cedar Rapids" (Grant Wood Country, p. 28). (It is with a description of a township of Wapsipinicon County, Iowa, that Suckow's novel Country People opens.) In his "Aim of the Colony," Wood refers to the "need," in "the year 1932," of a "combination camp and summer art school within this section of the Middle West." He explains that his "faith in middle-western material . . . is founded upon the conviction that a true art expression must grow up from the soil itself"--a feeling similar to one expressed in Knister's "Via Faust." Wood adds that "a group of people painting harmoniously together, each

contributing his own images to the forming of an accumulated vision, may accomplish a great deal" (Grant Wood Country, p. 29). Wood's linking of "images" and "vision," in the context of discussing regional artistic reflection, reiterates the sensibility found in Knister's work. And Wood's recognition of the freedom regionalism allows the individual artist, or regionalism's lack of prescriptive technical limitations, would accord with Knister's expressed sense of regionalism.

Another direct link exists between the outlook of Wood and Knister in the form of their common recognition of The Midland. Wood's 1935 pamphlet, Revolt Against the City, "published in Iowa City," is a work "outlining his basic principles of art" and "promotion of regionalism" (Dennis, p. 228). In closing, Wood states that "regional literature . . . might well be encouraged," and praises "Such 'little' magazines as Iowa's 'Midland.'" He concludes by expressing his "hope that the next few years may see a growth of . . . regional activity in the arts and letters" (Dennis, p. 235). Like Knister, Wood values a publication such as The Midland for encouraging "regional activity" in the arts--work that may not entirely reflect place in terms of "photographic realism," but work that can conjure the extraordinary nature of the here-and-now.

Anderson, Lewis, Sandburg and Suckow offered Knister literary precedents for reflecting the experience of North American life. These writers, like Hemingway, treated the here-and-now as valid literary material. With Anderson, Hemingway, Lewis, Sandburg, Suckow

and Wood, Knister was an artist of the North American mid-west, who captured the magic of immediate reality with an intensity that sheer verisimilitude cannot necessarily convey. Experienced reality is the basis of Knister's art, if not the boundary of it.

Knister's hint that the work of American nineteenth-century writers of romance could serve as a precedent for Canadian writing, like his references to Goethe, suggests the importance Knister placed on literature unrestricted by photographic realism. American writers of regionalism offered Knister literary precedents that affirmed the validity and possibility of reflecting Canadian life in Canadian literature. As Knister comments in an essay,

Just because the models are before the readers the task is arduous and heroic of depicting characters which shall square with life. They may transcend the people we see about us, but they must be true to them, and true to type. We must get our Canadians from Canada. Perhaps it is because of the difficulties attending upon the discovery of the interesting and the heroic in everyday reality that our novelists have tended to shirk the task, and too frequently give us abstractions fit for movie or stage types. But we have our future before us, to be made from the poetry of the real. Novelists, poets, allons!<sup>44</sup>

While Knister experiments, moving from Southwestern Ontario farm life to the life of Keats, from a novella of prison that has the hallucinogenic power of a nightmare to a novella of the peach harvest time, concern with the richness of reality characterizes his novellas and novels. Textual evidence suggests that, in Knister's longer prose fiction, the extraordinary nature of experienced reality

is the heart of the matter. Raymond Knister's novels and novellas discover the promised land in assimilating the circumstances of everyday reality and the artist's vision.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister: A Biographical Note," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), pp. 175-176. Further references to this essay will appear in the text. Although Knister's legal name was John Raymond Knister, he used the name Raymond Knister.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Knister, "The Middle West in New Books," rev. of Archie Gelston by Roger Sergel and The Able McLaughlins by Margaret Wilson, The Border Cities Star, 24 November 1923, p. 7. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Livesay, "Knister's Stories," rev. of Selected Stories of Raymond Knister, ed. Michael Gnarowski, Canadian Literature, No. 62 (1974), p. 80. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small-town Life, introd. Ernest Boyd (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 146. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Knister, "Peaches, Peaches," in The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint, No. 17, ed. and introd. Peter Stevens (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 57. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text. Hereafter, this anthology will be cited as The First Day of Spring.

<sup>6</sup> "To Ernest Walsh, Schruns, 2 January 1926," Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), p. 186. Professor D. Arnason kindly brought this reference to my attention.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Ernest Walsh to Raymond Knister, 23 April 1925. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Knister, "Wealth of Books from All Parts of the World," TS, pp. 2-3, File 83. The Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Hemingway, In Our Time (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), pp. 49-50.

10. Sherwood Anderson, Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs: A Critical Edition, ed. Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 342.
11. Letter received from Imogen Knister Givens, 22 October 1983.
12. Ruth Suckow, Country People (Toronto: Macmillan, 1924), p. 9.
13. Foreword to "Group Portrait." TS, p. 1. Knister Family Papers. Courteously provided by Imogen Knister Givens.
14. Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 55.
15. Ruth Suckow, Iowa Interiors (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 108.
16. Raymond Knister, "The Interior of America," rev. of Iowa Interiors by Ruth Suckow, Saturday Night, 4 December 1926, pp. 11-12.
17. The effect of Knister's title can be compared to the effect of certain titles used by the American writer of lyrics, Bruce Springsteen: Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J. (1972), Nebraska (1982), and Born in the U.S.A. (1984). Both writers coin titles that refer to geographical place and, ultimately, state of mind.
18. Ruth Suckow, The Bonney Family (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 3. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.
19. Marcus Cunliffe, The Literature of the United States (London: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 266. Further references to this work will be given in the text.
20. Raymond Knister, "On Reading Aloud," The New Outlook, 27 October 1926; p. 14. Further references to this essay will appear in the text.
21. Imogen Knister Givens' courteously provided a copy of Raymond Knister's 1914-1924 reading list. Knister Family Papers.
22. Raymond Knister, "Corn Husking," in Windfalls for Cider: The Poems of Raymond Knister, preface James Reaney, ed. and introd. Joy Kuropatwa, afterword Imogen Knister Givens (Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1983), pp. 67-74.
23. Carl Sandburg, "Laughing Corn," in Complete Poems: Carl Sandburg (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 87. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text.
24. Raymond Knister, "The Poetic Muse in Canada," Saturday Night, 6 October 1928, p. 3.

25 Dorothy Livesay, ed. and memoir; Collected Poems of Raymond Knister (Toronto: Ryerson, 1949), p. xxi.

26 Raymond Knister, "The Poetry of Archibald Lampman," in The First Day of Spring, p. 464.

27 Raymond Knister, "Notes for Novel (Group Portrait)," MS, p. 2. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

28 Raymond Knister, "Purposes of Fiction," The New Outlook, 13 October 1926, p. 16, col. 3.

29 Raymond Knister, "Canadian Literati," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 162.

30 Harry Levin, "Observations on the Style of Ernest Hemingway," in Contexts of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 156. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

31 Raymond Knister, "Katherine Mansfield," in The First Day of Spring, p. 429. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text.

32 Raymond Knister, "Canadian Letter," in The First Day of Spring, p. 381. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

33 Raymond Knister, "Duncan Campbell Scott," in The First Day of Spring, p. 402.

34 Letter from Raymond Knister to Henry Goodman, 16 October 1922. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

35 Telephone interview with Imogen Knister Givens, 16 January 1985. This passage occurs in the first volume of Goethe's autobiography; Knister's copy is inscribed with the dates of his reading of the volume: 9 February to 15 March, 1919.

36 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, The Autobiography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, trans. John Oxenford, introd. Karl J. Weintraub (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), I: 299. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

37 Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 231.

38 Raymond Knister, "Via Faust," TS, p. 1. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario. Subsequent references to this document will appear in the text.

39 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, trans. Barker Fairley (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 200.

40 Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University, 1977, p. 221.

41 Raymond Knister, "The Why of Realism," The New Outlook, 15 September 1926, p. 14, cols. 1-2.

42 Joan Liffing-Zug, John Zug and Nan Wood Graham, This is Grant Wood Country (Davenport, Iowa: The Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, 1977), p. 63. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

43 James M. Dennis, Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p. 121. Further references to this study will be given in the text.

44 Raymond Knister, "The Canadian Girl," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 159.

## Chapter II "Group Portrait": To Celebrate the Commonplace

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

"Group Portrait" is Raymond Knister's first novel. The Knister papers include two earlier, shorter versions of the same work. In chronological order, the three versions of the work are the story "The Old Gestures," the story "Group Portrait," and the novel "Group Portrait."

"The Old Gestures" exists in the form of a manuscript, which includes light revisions. While the manuscript is decipherable, the handwriting of this version makes for halting reading. The date "Feb. 21, 1922" appears on the first page of the manuscript. Although the final page of the manuscript bears the number forty four, the work is actually forty six pages long; pages "21 (a)" and "21 (b)" are between pages twenty one and twenty two. "The Old Gestures" is among The Raymond Knister Papers held at McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.<sup>1</sup>

While "The Old Gestures" is a work of early 1922, as Marcus Waddington explains, by the July of 1922 Knister had written "a revised version of his long story 'The Old Gestures' which he now called 'Group Portrait.'"<sup>2</sup> The story, "Group Portrait," exists in

the form of a typescript of forty five pages. Presumably Knister considered submitting the work for publication: at the top left corner of the first page, "12500 [sic] words" appears, while the notation "Raymond Knister, Bleinheim, R.R.1, Ont., Can." appears at the bottom of the last page of the typescript. (Blenheim is southeast of Chatham, near the shore of Lake Erie.) The neatness of the typescript strengthens the possibility that Knister contemplated submitting the work for publication. The story "Group Portrait," like "The Old Gestures," is part of the collection of Knister papers held at McMaster University.<sup>3</sup>

Waddington notes that Knister began work on expanding the story "Group Portrait" "by the fall of 1922" (p. 177); the expanded version, Knister's "first novel," was completed by the March of 1923 (p. 183). The novel "Group Portrait" exists in the form of a typescript of two hundred and ninety pages. The triple spacing of the typescript suggests that space was deliberately left for revisions, as Knister customarily used double spacing for his typescripts. Handwritten revisions, which are legible, appear throughout the typescript. Although revisions are frequent, they usually involve only a few words. Knister's handwritten additions intensify the contrast between characters with the impulse to create and those who prefer to consume. The paper of this typescript bears the watermark, "PROGRESS BOND, Made in Canada."<sup>4</sup> "Group Portrait" is among the Knister papers at Queen's University Archives.<sup>5</sup> "Group Portrait," like the stories "The Old Gestures" and "Group Portrait," has never been published.

Over the thirteen months from February, 1922 to March, 1923, Knister wrote three versions of the same tale, revising and expanding the original story until it became his first novel. Toward the end of his life, Knister would again turn his attention to the story with which his longer prose fiction writing career began. Knister's last novel, "Soil in Smoke," is a revised version of his first novel, "Group Portrait." "Soil in Smoke" is discussed in chapter nine.

## 2. The Action

The story, "The Old Gestures," consists of glimpses of the lives of the members of the Nebbit family. Two of the Nebbit children dominate the story: a son, Del, and a daughter, Virna. The parents and the younger children of the family receive relatively little attention. A "series of affairs, if some of them deserved a name of such pretension, with women" (p. 4) characterizes Del. He drifts from scheme to scheme, apart from his hobby of relations with "Janes" (p. 5). His seventeen-year-old sister, Virna, indulges in petty theft. The Nebbits raise tobacco, but Del and Virna have little interest in the operation of the family farm. Cars fascinate both of them; Del first appears in the story after fixing an engine at a neighbour's farm (p. 3), and Virna first appears when she meets Del on the road, and explains that she was unable to use the family car to drive to a dance at the nearby beach (p. 7). "The Old Gestures"

concludes on an ominous note: before leaving a dance, Virna steals an "ermine stole" from the cloak room (pp. 43-44).

The action of the story, "Group Portrait," is substantially the same as that of "The Old Gestures," but interesting differences occur. As the change of title indicates, there is a greater emphasis on characterization in the second version. For example, in "The Old Gestures," Del works for a neighbour "because there was plenty of help on the home farm without him" (p. 18). In "Group Portrait," Del's additional reason for working for a neighbour is "to follow his own inclination" (p. 17). Knister also intensifies the colours of Virna's portrait from the first to the second version of the story. A passage added in the second version describes Virna's contempt for the clothes of the men eating "the threshing meals" her mother makes (p. 22). However, in both versions Virna prefers to sew a dress for herself than help her mother prepare a meal for the threshers.

The novel, "Group Portrait," also concentrates on the characters of Del and Virna, although in this version their names are Del and Robina (or Roby) Nebblin. Knister presents the portraits of these characters against the background of tobacco farming. The Nebblins plan the number of acres to be devoted to tobacco, sucker tobacco (nip off the shoots of the plants in order to increase the size of the tobacco leaves), pack tobacco leaves into bales, and wonder what price their tobacco crop will fetch. As Del and Robina find their separate roads to hell, the Nebblins raise a large tobacco crop with painstaking care, only to reap a bitter harvest of



disappointment when tobacco prices slump.

### 3. Influences and Sources

"Group Portrait," in describing the details of raising tobacco, has a decidedly regionalist flavour. The novel includes local slang, and the colour and prejudice such language reflects; for example, potatoes are called "Irish lemons" (p. 167), and at school Corra, one of the younger Nebblin children, ignores one "Maud and her bunch from the townline" (p. 223). As well, the novel has a rather specific setting in time and place. The Nebblin farm is near the shore of Lake Erie. "Group Portrait" includes references to the village of Hagersville (p. 112), which is northeast of Simcoe, Ontario, and the hamlet of Blytheswood (p. 122), which is north of Leamington, Ontario. "Group Portrait" opens in summer, and covers a time span of about eighteen months. In the first autumn of the time the novel covers, President Wilson is in office (p. 56). Woodrow Wilson was in office from 1912 to 1920. However, "Group Portrait" is post-First World War in setting (pp. 139 and 248). Therefore the events of "Group Portrait" occur between 1919 and 1922. For his novel set at the opening of the roaring twenties, a time when tobacco was just becoming a popular crop in southern Ontario, Knister could look to the regionalist work of two writers for precedent--Anton Chekhov and Sherwood Anderson.

Knister's reading list for the years 1914 to 1924 indicates that

he read Chekhov's "Rothschild's Fiddle" in 1919, 1920 and 1921, and Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio twice in 1921 and once in 1923.<sup>6</sup> What relates "Group Portrait" to "Rothschild's Fiddle" and Winesburg, Ohio is the use of a rural, regional setting as a context for the exploration of psychological and emotional realities. In the short story "Rothschild's Fiddle," the protagonist, Yakov Ivanov, thinks as he laments the lost promise of his life,

And why was it a man could not live so as to avoid these losses and misfortunes? One wondered why they had cut down the birch copse and the pine forest. Why was he walking with no reason on the grazing ground? Why do people always do what isn't needful?<sup>7</sup>

Chekhov presents landscape in relation to character, and associates the two, with the effect of strengthening the reader's impression of both. "Rothschild's Fiddle" illustrates how, in mirroring human concerns, the physical environment assumes a symbolic role. In an essay, Knister praises Chekhov for "putting the object or fact before us without symbols of any sort,"<sup>8</sup> or praises Chekhov for conveying the symbolic import inherent to the things of an everyday environment. "Rothschild's Fiddle" evokes the process of the protagonist's growing self-knowledge, and the fiddle of the story's title is the symbol of Ivanov's discovery of self-knowledge. Ivanov recognizes and then abates his mean treatment of others, and eventually he bequeaths his treasured fiddle to the person whom he once passionately hated, Rothschild. The fiddle of Chekhov's story is an object of everyday life which gradually acquires symbolic meaning in the course of the

story; the objects of everyday life, like the rural ~~environment~~, serve symbolic purposes as the revelation of character proceeds. Knister finished "Group Portrait" only weeks before leaving for Iowa, and while in Iowa he wrote of Chekhov, "his sympathetic sensitiveness was so great that he seemed to see and understand every possible quirk of character or bias of environment."<sup>9</sup> In "Group Portrait," it is precisely the elements Knister identifies in Chekhov's work-- character and environment--that are central.

Sherwood Anderson's 1919 collection of short stories, Winesburg, Ohio, explores the lives of some of the people who populate the small town of Winesburg, Ohio. Like Chekhov, Anderson presents character in relation to environment; the story of one of the townspeople, Doctor Reefy, is

delicious, like the twisted little apples that grow in the orchards of Winesburg. In the fall one walks in the orchards and the ground is hard with frost underfoot. The apples have been taken from the trees by the pickers. They have been put in barrels and shipped to the cities. . . . On the trees are only a few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected. They look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands. One nibbles at them and they are delicious. Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness. One runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apple.<sup>10</sup>

Anderson uses landscape in describing character and, like Chekhov, draws symbolic meaning from the things of everyday life. Knister wrote "Group Portrait" after repeatedly reading the work of Chekhov:

and Anderson, and Knister's first novel reflects his awareness of the literary use of rural, regional conditions in relation to character.

#### 4. Context

Knister wrote "Group Portrait" and its earlier versions while living at his family's farm, near Blenheim, Ontario. In a letter of 7 October 1922, to a friend addressed only as "Walter," Knister writes,

I've been thinking a little about the novel I want to make out of the long story I showed you . . . . The story was about a farm family, you will remember, with a girl in kleptomaniac [sic], something of a farm flapper. I have decided to make her the centre of interest, but the subject of the book won't really be her development, but her relation to her environment, family, etc.<sup>11</sup>

(Knister stresses his interest in his main character's relation to her physical and social environment. By the time Knister contemplated expanding his story of a "farm flapper" into a novel, he was a published poet and short story writer; his published work, generally rural in setting, had often presented man in relation to his environment.

Knister's short story, "The One Thing," appeared in the January issue of the Iowa journal, The Midland, in 1922.<sup>12</sup> The protagonist of "The One Thing," the farmer Billy Dulckington, edges towards madness for two reasons. Firstly, his obsession with horses--the

"one thing" Billy "cares about is his horses" (p. 2)--increases.  
 Secondly, his rural isolation also preys on his susceptibilities:

On some winter nights the light from his lantern could be seen gleaming from the windows of his stable at ten or eleven o'clock. He was currying the favourite ones of his numerous horses. It was to him a joy familiar and recurrently consummate to slick the colts down with rags, to . . . admire the round spring of rib on their well-turned bodies. (pp. 8-9)

For Billy, horses rather than people have "called forth his longing" (p. 3), and the story reveals the extent of Billy's preference for equine rather than human company. "The One Thing" includes two episodes that illustrate Billy's preference; during the first episode, a "raw fall wind which was streaming over the flat land" buffets Billy and gives him "a cold" (p. 7) while, in the second episode, Knister describes Billy as "holding his hands, crooked with the cold, over the cook-stove for a time" (p. 14). In "The One Thing," when Knister dramatizes Billy's preference for equine society, nature itself assaults Billy.

"Mist-Green Oats," perhaps Knister's best known short story, appeared in the August-September issue of The Midland in 1922.<sup>13</sup> In "Mist-Green Oats," young Len Brinder becomes increasingly impatient with the unrelenting work of the family farm. However, Len's irritation with the work of the farm coexists with his appreciation of the rural environment:

The green of an oats field beyond was visible under the apple-boughs. It was even now

beginning to take on a gray misty tinge. Soon the oats field would seem an unbelievable blue-gray cloud, glimpsed from beneath the apple trees.

... fields of wheat would bow and surge in amber-lit crests. The rows of young corn would be arching to either side and touching, black-green and healthy. The smell of it, as he cultivated and the horses nipped off pieces of the heavy leaves, would be more sweet than that of flowers . . . . (pp. 268-269)

In the context of "Mist-Green Oats," celebration of the natural world is the touchstone of tranquillity, if not psychological health. When weary of ploughing the obdurate earth, Len notes that "In the orchard the sunlight seemed to pack the heat down below the boughs and above the earth," and the boughs trap heat of "broiling" intensity. Len wonders, "Could it be as hot as this in the city, where one might go into the ice-cream parlors and the movie theatres?" (p. 259). Later, Len yearns for the time when "he should have reached the city and entered on some transcendently congenial and remunerative occupation"--and envisions as an alternative "his going to sea" (p. 267). Knister's presentation of Len's disgust with the work of the farm is telling: "The fatal impressibility of youth was lapping chains about him" (p. 271). "Mist-Green Oats" presents the idea of escape to the city as a quintessential delusion, and a dangerous delusion. In "Group Portrait," as in later Knister works of longer prose fiction, to try to escape from the rural environment is the desire of the doomed.

In the December of 1922, while Knister was in the middle of writing "Group Portrait," The Midland published a group of seven

Knister poems.<sup>14</sup> All but two of these poems, "Change" and "Snowfall," are explicitly rural in setting. All seven poems deal with man in relation to his environment, if to varying degrees, and more than one poem includes anthropomorphism. "Stable-Talk" evokes the end of a working day on a farm, as seen from the point of view of horses who have been at work harrowing. "February's Forgotten Mitts" presents the exhilaration of man and beast alike on one of the first mild days of the year, when thawing heralds the arrival of spring. In "Feed," the "whistling" of a person feeding pigs causes pause in the "guzzling" of "swill" whenever a "certain note" sounds. "Lake Harvest" describes the sawing of ice on Lake Erie; the "diamonds," "rainbows" and "shimmer of silver-blue" of the ice provide pleasure for the working men, while horses and trees remain "Patient" as the work proceeds. In "Peach Buds," as in "Stable-Talk," Knister employs a non-human, but not inhuman, point of view; peach buds explain what they endure as they "wait"--"In Winter's young Spring-rain/Stricken the lashed drops cling." The poem "Change" presents a paradox. "Change" makes a case for the revelation of character over time, while the sea serves as a symbol for change as a natural law: "the sea is constant to change." (Myrtle Knister had the poem "Change" inscribed on Knister's tomb, which is near Port Dover, on Lake Erie.) The last poem of the group of seven published in The Midland is "Snowfall." In "Snowfall," the snow represents itself as "Numbing the discords" of the earth, or fulfilling the earth's dream of harmony.

The work of Knister published at the time he was writing "Group

"Portrait" repeatedly deals with man in relation to his environment, and especially the rural environment. However, the lyrical celebration of nature in "Mist-Green Oats," like the anthropomorphism in Knister's poems, indicates Knister's interest in going beyond a photographic verisimilitude in his treatment of the environment. In a letter of 16 October 1922 Knister notes,

I did not mean to speak from behind the rampart of the dominant (whatever the ultra-intelligentsia may say) cult of realism of a more or less photographic sort.<sup>15</sup>

"Group Portrait" is precisely more a matter of presenting portraits than photographs--the subjective realities of portraits subsume the objective realities of photographs in Knister's first novel. Material reality is the basis of, if not the full extent of, the realities with which "Group Portrait" deals. In an extant fragment of his Foreword to "Group Portrait," Knister writes, "I want to amass an environment and characters which shall give off as you say, the action . . . . Or, to depend on the picture and make little in the way of story necessary."<sup>16</sup> Knister expresses a wish to create a "picture," in "Group Portrait," that shall invoke the nature of the novel's "environment and characters." Elsewhere Knister also refers to character as being at the heart of "Group Portrait." A two page manuscript document, entitled "Notes for Novel (Group Portrait)," consists of notes which Knister probably made between the story and novel versions of "Group Portrait." In these notes, Knister refers to the centrality of characterization in his novel:



The subject to be rendered is, as in *Wings of the Dove*, is [sic] one of moral, emotional evolution, so little a matter of drama that the result in action is indifferent; she may marry or go to the city, the subject is unaffected either way.<sup>17</sup>

Knister envisioned "Group Portrait" as revealing character, and moral questions and environment were to contribute to the process of character revelation. (The Wings of the Dove, a novel by Henry James published in 1902, explores in great detail and prolonged fashion the way in which a small group of people cope with a central moral dilemma.) "Notes for Novel" indicates, as well as the approach Knister envisioned for "Group Portrait," the desired effect of the novel; "Object of art, and of art of fiction is evocation of emotion" (p. 1):

The verisimilitude of "Group Portrait" is less a matter of a "photographic sort" of "realism" and more a matter of contribution to moving portraits of people who feel trapped by their environment. "Group Portrait" explores character in relation to environment and, as is the case in "Mist-Green Oats," the way in which characters perceive their everyday environment comes to have moral implications. The everyday environment described in Knister's first novel forms an essential part of the vision "Group Portrait" presents.

##### 5. Critical Reception

No study of "Group Portrait" currently exists.

## II. "Group Portrait"

"Group Portrait" shows Del and Robina Nebblin as being self-destructive in their shared scorn for the circumstances of their everyday lives. Their thirst for urban adventure is a manifestation of their restlessness with life on the farm; rural life offers little pleasure or beauty to either Del or Robina. The final failure of the Nebblins' tobacco crop to fetch more than a minimal price, as a result of the ultimate decline in the price of tobacco, is a descent that parallels the final situations of Del and Robina. In their shared scorn of everyday life, Del and Robina sow the seeds of their own destruction.

The two stories which are early versions of "Group Portrait" differ from the novel in focus, if not in basic action. In "The Old Gesture," as the title suggests, change pervades the story--the Nebbits grow tobacco, a relatively new crop, and technological innovation attracts the two Nebbit children, Del and Virna, on whom the story focuses. Each successive version of Knister's story focuses more sharply on these children, and it is in connection with Del and Virna that a balancing of opposing visions emerges as early as the first version of the story.

In "The Old Gesture," Del and Virna share an interest in cars, but the story closes as Virna is a passenger in a car that is "like a moving prison" (p. 44). In contrast, attention to the farm itself ends in pleasure, rather than imprisonment. On an autumn evening two

of the younger Nebbits, Frank and Herbie, go to catch chickens that have been roosting in the barn, where the Nebbits store tobacco. This chicken-catching scene is a lyrical interlude distinguishable from the rest of the story by diction, tone and mood. Significantly enough, this scene appears in all versions of the story. The rich beauty of the scene in which Frank and Herbie retrieve chickens (pp. 10-12) contrasts with the sterility associated with a fascination for automobiles. There is a hint that Del has suffered from venereal disease (p. 36), while Virna rides in a car that is "a moving prison" (p. 44) as she returns from a dance at the close of the story. The title "The Old Gestures" may refer to the fact that Del and Virna have little interest in the ancient occupation of farming, while having patience with, and an interest in, the technical innovations of the engine, the car, and the telephone.

The manuscript of "The Old Gestures" gives indications of the direction in which succeeding versions of the story would move. Pages "21 (a)" and "21 (b)" of the manuscript describe domestic events concerning Virna before and after she sings at "a social in the village." Knister does not describe the social, or travel to or from it, but concentrates exclusively on Virna's domestic behaviour and outlook.

The sequence opens, "Virna could not help her mother with the threshing meals, because she was busy most of the day finishing a dress." Virna plans to wear this dress at the social, where she hopes to make her presence felt. Although Knister does not describe

Virna at this specific social, he gives a generic description of her stage presence:

her voice when singing was clear and pretty and with her red shapely lips and blue eyes her small figure presented a pleasant picture while she sang, "He died in a rude, rude way, he did, On the batt-ul field one day."

Knister's description of Virna's stage presence implies that Virna's vanity has unpleasant consequences. She spends an entire day, not preparing meals for threshers, but preparing to look "pretty" in order to sing of people who "died in a rude, rude way." Virna does not distinguish between stage behaviour and behaviour in real life; when she returns from the social, "After giggling for a few moments at the front door with her escort she became very solemn at once." Once alone, Virna gazes at herself in the mirror, a narcissistic gesture in the context of the story.

Most of the second half of the sequence Knister added to "The Old Gestures" concerns the swirling thoughts of Virna as she drifts into sleep. The total effect of the sequence is to suggest that Virna's vanity, perhaps sharp enough to border on narcissism, is profound enough that only when she sleeps does she cease to behave as though she were on a stage. For Virna, appearance is reality, and her vision is a benighted one. In the novel "Group Portrait," Knister would expand the sequence in which Virna's conscious thought drifts into a dream, and the later version of the sequence amplifies the treatment of Virna's vanity and sexuality. Virna's vanity and sexual relations become increasingly important in the successive

versions of the work, for they contribute to the "portrait" of her vision.

Another indication the manuscript of "The Old Gestures" gives of the direction of later versions of the work is the marginal note, "More about Roland" (p. 21). Roland, the oldest son of the family, resembles Mrs. Nebbit in being relatively silent and hard-working. In the successive versions of the work, Roland's view of the everyday environment increasingly stands in contrast to the view Del and Virna (later Robina) take of their environment.

In the second version of the story, "Group Portrait," Knister intensifies the tension between creation and consumption. Roland becomes more closely associated with the work of the farm (p. 17), and also demonstrates more awareness of the beauty of the rural environment:

A maple bough could be seen, pink, spotted, with  
the clustered leaf-buds, gathered close . . . . .  
Like strange miniature plants they would be, germs  
of trees. Leaves as red, in a few months . . . . .  
[sic] He saw them as though they were in his hands.  
(p. 24)

Knister added Roland's appreciation of the seasons to the second version of the story. In early spring, Roland can see autumn leaves "as though they were in his hands"--he has an imaginative grasp of his environment that Del and Robina do not have. Knister's addition concerning Roland adds to the contrast between those characters who have an urge to consume and those characters who prefer to create.

In the first version, as Virna leaves a dance, "The blue road

spun away beneath" (p. 44). In the second version, "The hazy sulphur road spun away beneath" (p. 45). The "blue" road becomes the "hazy sulphur" road. In context, the word "hazy" suggests an impairment in visibility, and by extension a weakness in vision, while "sulphur" implies the unpleasant, if not the hellish. Similarly, in the first version, the car in which Virna rides is "like a moving prison" (p. 44), while in the second version the car is "a prison gliding" (p. 45). The final description of an automobile, a consumer item, is more damning in the second version, and the road the car takes becomes a kind of path to hell. In the novel "Group Portrait," the car becomes a symbol of the diabolical delusion that the attempt to deny everyday reality becomes.

The Nebblins hope that by growing tobacco they may become wealthy, and their wish for money ultimately becomes objectified in the wish to buy a new car. The details of growing, harvesting, and marketing tobacco pervade "Group Portrait," and to a considerable degree account for the increased volume of the novel as compared to its earlier versions. Reference to tobacco occurs on the first page of the novel; Del notices that "Tobacco was going to be grown on every farm" (p. 80), and Mr. Nebblin thinks, "It looked as if tobacco was going to be the crop next year" (p. 112). Tobacco is the subject of gossip in the village near the Nebblin farm (pp. 159-160). The Nebblins busy themselves "suckering tobacco all day" (p. 23), consider the need "to get the land ready for tobacco" (p. 170), and work at "cultivating tobacco . . . a careful job" (p. 175). The Nebblins' devotion to their tobacco crop reflects

their fantasy that raising tobacco will cure their financial ills, an illusion of inflated expectations at a time of rising tobacco prices.

To rely on rising tobacco prices becomes a matter of building castles in the air. Mr. Nebblin thinks of "somebody foolish" who has tried to grow "burley" in "clay loam"--"it would grow, but big and rank" (p. 113). The novel's opening paragraph describes the instability of the "clay" that tends to "disintegrate" (p. 1) on the shore of Lake Erie, near the Nebblin farm. In the context of "Group Portrait," soil surfaces and subterranean levels or foundations count, and the house of the Nebblins lacks a foundation (p. 152). For the Nebblin family, prosperity derived from growing tobacco is as much a chimera as the fulfilment of the escapist desires of Del and Robina.

"Group Portrait" presents the comparative reactions of Roland, Del, and Robina to fluctuations in the price of tobacco. Roland's response to a decrease in tobacco prices is to think, "They would have to work all the harder next year. They'd have to think of something else to put in in place of tobacco" (p. 244). The reaction of Roland contrasts him to Del and Robina. Roland thinks of the consequences of decreased tobacco prices, but Del and Robina think of the consequences of tobacco price increases. Del dismisses the "tobacco business" as being of any importance to him, because he assumes that Mr. Nebblin "would drive a tight bargain for wages" (p. 139). Robina considers what money paid for the Nebblins' tobacco might buy:

tobacco at thirty cents might mean so many things. Perhaps they could buy the farm next year. If they did she had no dread of not being able to make them build a new house. Before that there would have to be an automobile, not a little old thing like they had. (p. 93)

Roland is the Nebblin left to consider alternate crops when the price of tobacco drops; Del considers rising tobacco prices in terms of his personal disposable income, while Robina lusts after the money that tobacco might bring for its power to purchase such material goods as a car. Interestingly enough, the building that the Nebblins use to house their car is, to Roland, "the granary," while the other Nebblin sons call the same building "the 'garage'" (p. 131).

A new car is the first thing that, Robina hopes, money derived from tobacco will buy. When it looks as though tobacco prices will be high, the fever to buy a new car infects all the Nebblins, although Roland shows some degree of immunity to this fever (pp. 211-212). The car becomes a symbol of delusion. In the context of "Group Portrait," the car becomes especially associated with Del and Robina, who seek to escape the boredom of everyday life, and thirst after the escapism and excitement that they associate with the automobile.

Del is a "brown-haired young man of twenty-five, short and . . . powerful" (p. 4). He first appears after repairing an engine for a neighbourhood farmer, Rendall (p. 5), and Del can imagine himself explaining "how he made some gasoline engine go when nobody else was able to" (p. 138). Del prefers driving a car to "poking along" a rural road in a "wagon" (p. 79), and he has a perennial interest in



"classy dames" (p. 240). The rural life consequently offers him less scope for his interests than the city; on a November day in the countryside, Del longingly thinks of "the city" in "winter. He began to hum. The women in furs, stepping from the closed cars." Del despises the "mindless people" of the town near the Nebblin farm, a town he thinks of as "Some burg!" (p. 80).

The desire of Del for the women and cars of the city brings him trouble. There are repeated hints that Del has contracted venereal disease. He "was not taken in the draft," and remembers the "disgust of the doctors, grins of the recruits" (p. 139). The last view of Del in "Group Portrait" is a scene in which he ventures outdoors on a mild January day, as he is slowly recovering from what is probably a bout of venereal disease (pp. 266-270).

As Del watches his brothers build a garage on a mild January day, Frank remarks of cars passing the Nebblin farm, "'Whiskey in them busses [sic], boy'" (p. 268). Del comments of the illicit trade in liquor,

"I knew a guy in the city, he drove . . . a regular load, regular. He told me all about it, how they do. They don't drive any make like you think.

"What do they drive?" Roland looked around.

"Why, it ain't the driver gets all the money. He was just a--a ordinary fellow, good driver. I could get a job driving one of them."

"Del, could you?" Herbie implored him to say it again. Roland turned back and began hammering. Frank searched his pockets for an extra nail, his pouch was empty. (p. 268)

Del's hesitation in his description of an anonymous person who drives

for bootleggers, and Del's unspoken memories of drinking with friends "at one o'clock in a back-saloon" (pp. 239-240), suggest that Del himself might be the driver of bootleg liquor he mentions to his brothers. Del yearns for the women and the cars of the city, but his association with the former gives him venereal disease and the nature of his association with the latter may ultimately imprison or kill him. Knister underlines Del's distaste for rural life--Del, for example, regrets that he looks "so hayseedy" (p. 140). Del thinks that he and Robina are "cleverer than the rest" of the Nebblins (p. 14), but what Del and Robina share is a contempt for the countryside and a desire to escape from the rural environment, a desire that in the context of "Group Portrait" spells doom.

Robina is seventeen (p. 10); and she first appears in the novel, seen from a distance by Del, as "a small figure of a girl, smaller beside the trees that leaned above the road" (p. 11). Trees repeatedly dwarf Robina; as she lies in bed she thinks that "the apple orchard seemed never to go away; it leaned black above her" (p. 76). She also repeatedly sees trees as being black; to Robina, peach trees "make the land so black" (p. 73), and in the winter the trees she sees from a window look "like tiny black ferns" (p. 275). Robina's view of trees as dark, or darkly threatening, represents her view of local landscape and local life. Robina literally cannot take a fruitful view of everyday rural life; to her eyes, apple and peach trees do not, in winter, represent the promise of fruition but a vaguely threatening, black, or dark presence. Materialism is what

attracts Robina; at "sixteen" she steals a "silver mesh purse" from her employer (pp. 255-256).

Robina's treatment of Benny Slooman and Stanley Warnock especially reveals her impatience with rural life. Benny's view of the local landscape opens the novel (p. 1) and, in his attraction to Robina, he overlooks malicious local gossip about her light-fingered habits (p. 29). Benny enjoys the quality of rural life; he takes pleasure in such things as wood fires (p. 119), and likes horses, while acknowledging that automobiles are becoming more popular than horses (p. 35). Eventually Benny comes to court Robina, whom he newly sees as a "creature of flashes, turnings, burnings" (p. 120). But while Benny sees in Robina "beauty . . . so near to him" (p. 121), Robina yearns for urban, and therefore distant, "beauty." Robina thinks, "There was beauty, more sweet than sin, where people wore the clothes, and lived in the houses, and did the things you read about" (p. 125). (This sentence appears as a handwritten addition in the typescript of "Group Portrait.") Benny can find "beauty" in his immediate environment, while Robina's conception of "beauty" involves the "things" of the city--her vision is one of glittering materialism, and so it is a "silver mesh purse" that she steals. The difference in the visions of Benny and Robina emerges in their different views of urban life; Benny finds Robina's "enthusiasm" for the city, where he has spent three winters, "puzzling" (p. 122). Robina craves the "things which put the gilding on life" (p. 125), and assumes she can find such things in the city. Her craving for "gilding" overlooks natural wealth; Robina thinks "how dull everything" is, even as she

sees a field that is "a lake of golden-rod, with spray, whitecaps" (p. 73). She finally rejects Benny because she sees him as someone who has "been to the city" and was "foolish enough" to leave the place (p. 126). As Robina rejects Benny, who cares for her, she thinks of their relationship, "killing it would be the death of her yet" (p. 191). Robina's thought has symbolic validity in the context of "Group Portrait," for her preferences, like Del's, are ominous.

Robina rejects Benny in favour of Stanley, whose family is prosperous, and whom she associates with his "long car" (p. 44). Stanley is both "too good to be true" (p. 93) and "a good driver" (p. 75) in Robina's eyes. His "long car" is "available for dances" (p. 93), and to Robina represents the promise of escape from everyday life.

As Robina drifts into sleep, her memories of an evening with Stanley blend into her sense of the orchard near her bedroom being a black presence leaning over her. (This scene exists only in rudimentary form in the earlier versions of "Group Portrait".) As the scene closes, she remembers Stanley saying he cannot see a resemblance between Del and Robina, and she falls asleep wondering,

What did his lying mean? He was nearly four years older than she, must be twenty-one or more. Long, lank brown face flat with features which were no part of it, stuck out like ornaments, scrollings. (p. 78)

As Robina falls asleep, Stanley's face becomes a gargoyle that mocks her desire for "beauty, more sweet than sin." In the final scene of

the novel, Robina goes to a dance with Stanley, where she becomes attracted to a stranger called Albert, implicitly agrees to sleep with Stanley, and steals an ermine stole from the cloak room before leaving (pp. 281-290). At the dance, Robina sees people "in the galleries" as "strange quivering ornaments" (p. 281); while earlier she sees Stanley's face as acquiring "ornaments" and "scrollings" as she falls asleep (p. 78). Robina's yearning for beauty remains sterile as long as her desires are essentially escapist, selfish, and materialistic; Robina has difficulty seeing others as more than "ornaments" to her own existence.

Robina defines her relationship with Benny as "going on in that dead alive way!" (p. 195)--an observation that appears as a handwritten addition in the typescript of "Group Portrait"--but it is her relationship with Stanley, of the "long car," which means metaphorical death for Robina. In "Group Portrait," Robina is last seen at a dance that is, so to speak, a dance of death. The first reference to Robina in the novel occurs when Del mentions her positive view of dancing to a neighbour (p. 8). While dismissing Benny, Robina tells him, "I could just dance till I died" (p. 194). At the dance which closes the novel, the prospects of a bright future for Robina dim, if not actually die.<sup>18</sup> Robina thinks of where she lives as "this hole" (p. 125), and perceives trees as darkly threatening; however, it is Robina's conception of her environment that is morbid, rather than the environment itself.

"Group Portrait" includes indications of the elements that would become the focus of attention in the later version of the work,

"Soil in Smoke." Benny's view of the landscape opens both novels, and in the later version he again asks himself whether it is Robina's resemblance to Roland, or her similarity to Del, that he finds attractive (p. 197). A central scene in "Group Portrait" describes Roland's vision of woodland "beauty" (pp. 188-190), a vision that distinguishes Roland's view of the world, which resembles Benny's, from the world view that Del and Robina hold. In "Group Portrait," Del and Robina find little in their environment worth celebrating, and so pave the way to their respective private hells.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "The Old Gestures," MS, Box 6. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this story will be found in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 177. Subsequent references to this thesis will be found in the text.

<sup>3</sup> "Group Portrait," TS, Box 5. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this story will be found in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Letter received from Marion Helen Cobb, Queen's University Archives, 3 December, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> "Group Portrait," TS. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Imogen Knister Givens courteously provided a copy of Raymond Knister's 1914 to 1924 reading list. Knister Family Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Anton Tchekov, "Rusalkin's Fiddle," in The Chorus Girl and Other Stories, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Chatto and Windus, 1922), p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Knister, "Katherine Mansfield," in The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose, ed. and introd. by Peter Stevens (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 434.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Knister, rev. of Love, and Other Stories by Anton Chekov and The Dove's Nest, by Katherine Mansfield, TS, p. 2. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>10</sup> Sherwood Anderson, "Paper Pills," in Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small-town Life, introd. Ernest Boyd (New York: Random House, 1947), pp. 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Raymond Knister to Walter [Muilenburg], 7 October 1922. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

12. Raymond Knister, "The One Thing," in The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West, 8, No. 1 (1922), pp. 1-18. Further references to this story will appear in the text.

13. Raymond Knister, "Mist-Green Oats," in The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West, 8, Nos. 8-9 (1922), pp. 254-276. Further references to this story will appear in the text.

14. Raymond Knister, "Seven Poems," in The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West, 8, No. 12 (1922), pp. 329-332.

15. Letter from Raymond Knister to Henry Goodman, 16 October 1922. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

16. Foreword to "Group Portrait." TS, p. 1. Knister Family Papers. Courteously provided by Imogen Knister Givens.

17. Raymond Knister, "Notes for Novel (Group Portrait)," MS, p. 2. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Further reference to these notes will appear in the text.

18. Knister's short story, "Mist-Green Oats," was published in the summer of 1922; Knister began expanding the story, "Group Portrait," into a novel by the autumn of 1922. Waddington points out that, in "Mist-Green Oats," Knister makes significant symbolic use of dance (pp. 134-136); in the novel, "Group Portrait," Robina's fondness for dancing similarly has symbolic significance. Waddington argues that "three dances," in "Mist-Green Oats," contribute to the presentation of the protagonist's "awareness" of his "relation to the environment"; in "Group Portrait," the association of dance with Robina cumulatively suggests the nature of her consciousness of her environment.



## Chapter III "Turning Loam": Photographs and Visions

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

"Turning Loam" is the second novel Knister wrote. Marcus Waddington explains that Knister began work on the novel in

March, 1924, and completed a first draft by early June. Originally calling it "Back Concessions," Knister changed the title to "Easy Going" and "The Happy Family" before he finally settled on "Turning Loam."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, only extremely brief fragments exist of earlier versions of "Turning Loam," and these fragments provide limited information about the genesis of the work. Typed fragments of "Back Concessions" are among The Raymond Knister Papers at McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. A page numbered "184" includes a handwritten addition which mentions the character "Israel."<sup>2</sup> In "Turning Loam," Israel is a French-Canadian farm worker. Knister's presentation of French-Canadians constitutes a current that amplifies the main theme of the novel: the search for a vision of the life of the land, as experienced by the protagonist, Howard Winters, a young man living on a farm in Essex County, Ontario. A page of typescript numbered "196" includes minor handwritten revisions that emphasize

the presence of Rosemary, a guest at the Winters household whom Howard is temporarily infatuated with.<sup>3</sup> An especially interesting passage occurs in a page of typescript numbered "210."<sup>4</sup> Knister's protagonist, temporarily soured toward farm life while under Rosemary's influence, imagines--of "young men" leaving "farms" for "the cities"--"They did it as Madame Blatavsky. [sic] said people sold their souls to the devil, to have someone on their side." The passage continues, "On the side of the city was youth, gaiety, leisure, even an illusion at least of beauty." Knister omits these remarks in "Turning Loam" (p. 211),<sup>5</sup> possibly because they are more directly relevant to the symbolic level of "Group Portrait" than "Turning Loam." A page of typescript numbered "247" has a vertical line drawn along the left side of a paragraph describing Howard's sister, Hazel, and the handwritten comment "Incidental?" appears on the left margin of the page. The substance of this passage appears in "Turning Loam" (p. 247).

A fragment of "Back Concessions," numbered page "136," is among the Knister family papers. In this fragment, a female character refers to the room "in Canada for anyone who would undertake the improvement of literary taste."<sup>6</sup> Presumably the speaker, referred to in the fragment only as "she," is an earlier version of Dell Greene, who in "Turning Loam" is a writer, literary critic, and Howard's neighbour.

Also extant are typed fragments of "The Happy Family." A three page fragment, with pages numbered "199," "A-200," and "201," is in

The Raymond Knister Collection of Victoria University Library.<sup>7</sup> In this fragment, Dell attacks the acceptability, for publication in Canada, of poetry that tends to "catalogue nature" (p. 201). The remark accords with Knister's own poetry repeatedly evoking the relationship between man and his environment. Ten typed pages of "The Happy Family" are among the Knister papers at Queen's University Archives.<sup>8</sup> The numbering of this fragment runs from "36" to "46" and, while there is neither a page "43" nor "44," there are two different pages of text bearing the number "42." This fragment presents, in less polished prose, material corresponding to that found in "Turning Loam" (pp. 35-43). This sequence consists of conversation between different members of the Winters family and Rosemary, as well as Howard's thoughts about, and currying of, the horses on the Winters farm.

A vitally interesting fragment of "The Happy Family"--a page of typescript numbered "150"--is among The Raymond Knister Papers at McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario.<sup>9</sup> The corresponding dialogue in "Turning Loam" is radically different. In this fragment, Howard asks Knister's artist,

"You want to write; then, write books?"

"Some day, yes," she admitted.

"Eventually,--why not now?"

"Oh, one's got to get these things focussed.

It isn't a matter of not having seen enough. Everyone of ten years old, I imagine, has enough material for a fine book, if they but knew it."

"You mean that it should be unified by a sort of philosophy of life?"

"Mmm, I suppose it's not exactly a philosophy.

It's more like a point of view, simply."  
Howard saw this, and did not see it.

The corresponding dialogue in "Turning Loam" has Knister's artist speak of "art" arising from "vision," rather than "simply" expressing "a point of view" (p. 135). Knister's sharp revision of this exchange implies the extent to which "Turning Loam" reflects Knister's aesthetic position.

Knister presumably considered the novel to be a finished work, for he submitted it for publication, if with discouraging results. Waddington notes that, although Knister submitted the work for publication in 1925, the novel was rejected.<sup>10</sup> In a letter of 27 August 1925, the president of Macmillan of Canada, Hugh Eayrs, rejects "Turning Loam," claiming that if the "characters" are "real," the work includes "uninteresting scenery." Eayrs states that the novel lacks "development," and repeats that the novel is "nebulous."<sup>11</sup>

"Turning Loam" exists in the form of a two hundred and eighty-nine page typescript, which is in The Raymond Knister Collection of Victoria University Library. The paper bears the watermark, "Progress Bond."<sup>12</sup> "Turning Loam" has never been published.

"Turning Loam" should be published, for there is hardly a plethora of Canadian novels of the nineteen-twenties that feature a main character who is an artist. In the case of "Turning Loam," Dell Greene is not only a writer and critic, but outspoken on the subject of Canadian literature. "Turning Loam" clarifies Knister's aesthetic views, and the novel has enduring value as a work that convincingly

combines verisimilitude with richly symbolic material.

## 2. The Action

"Turning Loam" depicts rural life in Essex County, Ontario in the nineteen-twenties. The protagonist, Howard Winters, is a recent graduate of an agricultural college. The action of the novel largely consists of Howard's vacillation in his choice of a mate. His choice is between Rosemary Count, a materialist who has contempt for rural life, and an artist, Dell Greene, who cherishes and tries to interpret the everyday life of the countryside. In the course of the novel, Howard's interest in cultivating the land becomes the counterpart of Dell's interest, as a writer and literary critic, in cultivating Canadian literature.

## 3. Influences and Sources

Knister wrote "Turning Loam" while living in Iowa, and his reaction to the regionalism associated with the Iowa magazine, The Midland, is in accord with "Turning Loam" being very strongly rooted in a particular region. However, literary allusions in "Turning Loam" point to the influence of works that go beyond the reflection of material realities that regionalism might imply. In the course of "Turning Loam," Howard refers to Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel, Babbitt, while Dell refers to Lewis's 1920 novel, Main Street

(pp. 269-270). In context, these references suggest the feasibility and viability of ordinary life and a sense of place as subject matter. But the works Knister alludes to, like "Turning Loam" itself, involve psychological and visionary realities, as well as material reality.

In his 1923 review of Babbitt, Knister attacks the notion that the work is "'photographic,'" and notes that "it has somehow been taken for granted" that Main Street and Babbitt respectively "present an exact reproduction of the manners of Gopher Prairie and Zenith." Knister notes that, if Lewis felt "obliged to live up to 'realism,'"

nothing could exceed the gusto with which he unfolds the tale of Babbitt's foibles and adventures, the joyous satire of all the institutions of the hundred percenter and the Solid Citizen.

For Knister, Lewis's Main Street and Babbitt are not works of "photographic" verisimilitude, but works in which Lewis uses a "combination of the snap-shot and cartoon method."<sup>13</sup> Knister's description of Lewis's method, in both Main Street and Babbitt, of alternating or combining realistic passages with satirical ones, is exceptionally accurate. In fact, Knister's 1923 description of Lewis as being interested in realities beyond the bounds of "photographic" verisimilitude anticipates the flamboyant colours of Lewis's portrait of Sharon Falconer in the 1927 novel, Elmer Gantry. The fact that both of the main characters of "Turning Loam" make positive references to Lewis works invites the reader of Knister's novel to

consider just how distant the world of "Turning Loam" is from the verisimilitude of a photograph.

#### 4. Context

Knister spent the early months of 1924 in Iowa, lived in Chicago from June until October, and in October returned to Canada. Waddington notes that "Turning Loam" was written between March and June of 1924; in other words, Knister wrote the novel between being occupied with editorial work on The Midland and driving a taxi through the crime-rife nights of the Chicago of the twenties. In biographical terms, "Turning Loam" is Knister's novel of Southwestern Ontario farm life as seen from the perspective of distance.

In terms of Knister's reading and writing, "Turning Loam" reflects Knister's simultaneous interest in both work dealing with psychological and visionary realities, and work dealing with material realities, and especially the reality of place. Knister's reading list, for the years 1914-1924, indicates the range of his literary interests at the time of writing "Turning Loam." In 1924, Knister read both Freud's A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis (1924) and Ruth Suckow's regionalist novel, Country People (1924).<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, Knister was attracted to the invisible realities of psychology while, on the other hand, the actualities of place held a fascination for him, and in "Turning Loam" he would tackle the problem

of evoking both tangible and intangible realities in his longer prose fiction.

By 1924, Knister's work was receiving fairly wide acceptance in avant-garde publications. His poem, "The Hawk," appeared in the April issue of Poetry (Chicago) in 1924.<sup>15</sup> In January, The Midland published the short story "The Loading,"<sup>16</sup> while five Knister poems appeared in The Midland's May issue: "The White Cat," "The Ploughman," "In the Rain, Sowing Oats," "Night Walk," and "The Roller."<sup>17</sup> Like "Turning Loam," these works employ the countryside as setting. In all these works, though, attention to the details and material actualities of place coexists with recognition of more intangible realities. An important technique in "Turning Loam" is the use of evocative images that suggest the inherent magic of everyday reality. Waddington points out that Knister's poetry can be described as imagistic, imagism resting on "the idea . . . that each poem should comprise an Image." Waddington adds, "Pound defined 'Image' as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.'"<sup>18</sup> As Harry Levin observes in the case of Hemingway, the experience of writing imagist poetry can make for prose that derives power from the use of especially intense images.<sup>19</sup>

The poem, "The White Cat," typifies the approach found in Knister's 1924 work. Simplicity marks the poem's opening line: "I like to go to the stable after supper." The second line, "Remembering fried potatoes and tarts of snow-apple jam," belies the simplicity of the opening line by evoking memory, sensory perception and highly



specific (and local) detail. The boy who is the narrator of the poem refers to a "White Cat" that crosses his path as he and his father return, "with the milk," from the stable to the house. Knister leaves precisely what the "White Cat" stands for open to question. The White Cat may be a very ordinary family pet seen with the intensity of unfettered or unjaded imagination, be a figment of the boy's active imagination, symbolize imagination itself, or even represent a combination of possible meanings. The point of Knister's poem, whatever the White Cat itself may mean, is that there is a discoverable excitement to everyday life, that the ordinary is inherently extraordinary. The name of the boy who narrates the poem is Howard, while the name of the protagonist of "Turning Loam" is Howard Winters; the child Howard and the young man Howard Winters resemble each other in seeing ordinary life as extraordinary in nature. The impulse to celebrate the commonplace is at the heart of "Turning Loam."

##### 5. Critical Reception

No study of "Turning Loam" currently exists.

##### II. "Turning Loam"

"Turning Loam" tells the story of Howard Winters' choice of a mate, and textual evidence implies that his choice has symbolic

implications. Howard initially flirts with Rosemary Count and materialism, but ultimately he develops a passion for the artist Dell Greene. The union of Howard and Dell represents the aesthetic "Turning Loam" suggests: the union of verisimilitude, or recognition of tangible reality, and symbolism, or recognition of intangible reality. It is, so to speak, not Rosemary Count and a pot of gold, but Dell Greene and an aesthetic position, that Howard finds at the end of the rainbow appearing toward the close of "Turning Loam."

The protagonist of the story, Howard Winters, is a "leanfaced dark young man with a narrow chin" (p. 11), who has recently returned to the family farm from his studies at "Agricultural College" (p. 70) in Guelph. His training matches his interest in the natural world; for example, when his younger teenaged brother, Ernest, makes an error in describing the nesting habits of a local bird, Howard notes "Ernest's fault of ornithology" (p. 13).

Howard hopes to do "justice to his own ideas" (p. 120) in his practice of farming. If Howard appreciates the theory of agriculture, he can also enjoy the practice of agriculture; his sister, Hazel, observes that he "likes doing chores" (p. 9). Yet Howard's interest in farm life extends beyond the theory and practice of farming:

he wouldn't need a lantern. Walking to the barn . . . he was only in part conscious of the warm ambient breeze and the dry smell of clay for miles around. The maples were quiet and cool; a vague moon suffused the clouds.

Why, he wondered, should . . . the familiar surroundings, the barn looming, windmill, the stable, smaller outbuildings with a radiance of packed clay before their doors, all seem

mysterious, but mysterious in no way but that of an expectancy almost joyful? (pp. 16-17)

The major feature of Knister's portrait of Howard Winters is Howard's desire to "see" farm life in the light of a clarifying vision.

Howard, for example, evaluates "a farm paper" by asking the questions, "'What does it give the farm ~~Anything~~ to unify, to relate our experience to an ideal?'" (p. 85). Howard is in search of the vision that will fuse an "ideal" to the reality of farm life.

Howard's attachment to the land emerges in a series of related images. These images involve the cultivation of corn on the Winters farm. Early in the novel Howard's sister, Hazel, and friends visiting the farm catch sight of Howard cultivating a field of corn:

To the west of the barn stretched a long field of corn, the rows of dark green young plants checkering the grey flatness of the soil. Very slowly down a long row came a team of horses with a low cultivator and a man half hidden behind them. The girls strolled to the fence.

The bush at the back of the farm seemed to take on a clearer and less hazy green as they watched. The morning sun gave promise of glaring brilliance in the coming day. Past the front of the farm extended the white high clay road; along it automobiles with comets' tails of dust moved. (p. 29)

The image of Howard, barely visible, cultivating a field of corn suggests that the field almost assimilates or accepts him. As the novel progresses, Howard's relation to the cultivation of corn comes into focus in an almost cinematic way. Here, Knister presents Howard as part of an image of a corn field seen from a distance;

later, Howard's own perceptions of cultivated corn give an intimately close view of the way in which his observation leads to the genesis of his vision.

Howard comes to associate the corn he tends on the family farm with the possibility of seeing the life about him in terms of a vision; he looks at "the west field, twenty acres of the little light green plants all bent the same way though there was no breeze," and thinks,

Dark and waving they would be in a few weeks, and pale after that and rustling, blocking the view to the horizon. Strangely the corn had a fascination for him, and he had felt it a distinction while a sojourner in the East and after, that there were only these three counties in Canada in which corn was grown to maturity. Elsewhere it might be grown for ensilage, but they got the seed here. Yet it was directly perhaps not at all the business aspect which attracted him. Money could be made from hogs or clover-seed. Rather it was as though the corn symbolized the waxing of the year and its wane; and the sight of the extended rows of shocks like wigwams, a pumpkin here and there red among them, or of all the fields left shivering, husked, pale-gold in late autumn sunlight, moved him as he was moved now by the dark freshly-moistened soil and serried plants almost visibly expanding.

A cloud strayed blackening the field . . . . . Perhaps . . . this pure day [had] the completeness of some vision of the ideal he had not known he possessed. He turned back into the stable, and went to the box in which the currycombs and brushes were kept. He would give the horses a rub-down as quickly as possible, before Ernest returned, since Ernest hated cleaning horses. (pp. 40-41)

The field of corn that Howard sees becomes the basis or ground of his "vision." To "see" the field with clarity is to see more than what

visibly exists in material reality at a given moment; to "see" the field, or to understand it, involves imagining what the field looks like in different seasons, and what feelings and memories the field can evoke. When Howard remembers that "they got the seed here," the implication is that for Howard the corn represents the seed or germ of his vision of farm life.

After Howard's moment of partial insight, he decides to "give the horses a rub-down" as he remembers that his brother dislikes this job. An attempt of Howard to focus his vision of farm life precedes an act on behalf of another. Interconnection between the growth of Howard's vision and his relations with others becomes increasingly pronounced in the course of the story.

Howard himself connects images of growing corn with the ripening of his maturity; as Howard and his family drive home after a picnic, the sight of growing corn prompts Howard's memory:

As a small child, he remembered, he had become lost wandering in one of his father's cornfields, among the austere towering stalks that clutched him like impotent and malevolent hands. He might have remembered cornfields so always, but for the accumulation of later experience in them. It seemed that a cornfield held all of life that he could know, that the sight of it epitomized the best . . . . There was one darkly luminous twilight after rain, when he had gone late for the cows, and jumped over the rail fence of the lane to pursue his way through the corn. It was full-grown, and the lower leaves above his waist, so that he was free to run, head bent, with long leaps, while the long wet cold leaves brushed his face and his upraised arms rhythmically. He ran on and on, until he came to the end of the field

and lay down, panting sobbingly, on a knoll, conscious of his dripping shirtsleeves and trickling bare legs; feet stuck with the wet crust which covered the long-dry soil. He looked a long time at the night with its obscurely hurrying and ominous clouds . . . .  
(pp. 173-174)

As a child, Howard finds the corn threatening, but his later experiences in a "cornfield" overlay his childhood reaction. As his maturity increases, his capacity for vision--which might make the recalled "twilight" "darkly luminous"--grows.

On the same drive during which Howard remembers his childhood experience in a cornfield; he notices that

Lanterns jogged behind barns, lamps twinkled orange-red from the farmhouses, drew the vision to haphazard interiors where people ate, slept, rested for more work; buildings in which hungry animals cried for food, tired horses rubbed sore shoulders against the sides of stalls or beat a tattoo with their knees jumping from the fork of the weary hired man.

It seemed now that before college he had had no adequate sense of all this interesting life, its unity in hope and desire and fear. Not life at all, but some outlying district from which the citadel of life barely on sunny days could be descried, from beneath the surface of toil and calculation. (p. 175)

"Lanterns" and "lamps" illuminate the night as Howard's "vision" goes beyond the confines of "a cornfield" to include the people who cultivate such fields. Central to the growth of Howard's vision is his new ability to admit the multiplicity of truths that make up human experience; now, if not "before college," he has a sense of "all

this interacting life, its unity in hope and desire and fear." The material reality of a field of corn becomes the basis for, and symbol of, Howard's growing vision of the life of the land.

The final focussing of Howard's vision becomes associated with his choice of a mate. Early in "Turning Loam," Howard refuses to respond to the curiosity of a neighbour who guesses that the acquisition of land by Howard's father means the probability of Howard's marrying in the near future (p. 34). Howard's eligibility and its ambiguous future are of more than incidental significance. In the course of "Turning Loam," Howard's choice between Rosemary Count and Dell Greene becomes a choice between two very different visions of life. "Turning Loam" opens with the question of Howard's sister, Hazel, who is in the presence of both Dell Greene and Rosemary Count, "'Mother, are you using the high lamp in the kitchen?'" The novel cumulatively sheds light on the different visions associated with Rosemary and Dell. And in the opening scene of the novel Howard's sister Hazel sits "beside Dell Greene," but "opposite" (p. 1) Rosemary Count.

Rosemary has "poise" and a "slender limp form"; she is Hazel's friend from "teaching days in a two-roomed schoolhouse" at Westford, and, as the story opens, is a guest in the Winters household (pp. 2-3). But Rosemary is foreign to the Winters household; she is from the London area, and privately considers herself to be currently among "pleasant simple people" (p. 6).

Rosemary cultivates artificiality; "her favourite adjective" is

the word "simple," which she "always" uses "with a murmured assumption of its quality which she meant to be only an affectation" (p. 12). Rosemary has "metallic brown hair" (p. 11), which also suggests artificiality and so matches her willingness to trivialize language. She becomes associated with the quantitative rather than the qualitative; her last name is "Count" (p. 1), and her father is "a wholesale hardware merchant" (p. 9). Early in "Turning Loam," Rosemary becomes associated with calculation, artificiality, and hardness. Although she has a "charm" (p. 17) for Howard, he is in search of a vision that would include qualitative truths.

Howard notices that Rosemary "seemed to have discovered that she liked the farm," and has "decided to stay a week and a half" (p. 36). But Rosemary expresses her allegiance to place in terms of the goods and services that a place offers:

"They can say we're being Americanized along the Border here if they like. Anyhow you can get away and see a good show, or get what you want in clothes." (p. 15)

Howard suspects that Rosemary is a "careless . . . girl" (p. 50) and, on a drive through the countryside, Rosemary reveals that one of the things she can be "careless" about is the land:

"You don't have such magnificent expanses in your native shire," said Howard laughing; he suspected that she did not notice or care about the character of the country in which she motored.

"Middlesex," she amended carelessly. "Oh, yes, I get lots of fun out of the hills around



London. Some of them take a good car too."  
(p. 54)

In her reply to Howard, Rosemary expresses a lack of interest in the qualitative aspects of landscape. Howard's question concerns the beauty of the environment, while Rosemary's reply introduces the subject of consumer goods. A profound difference of vision separates Howard and Rosemary, and the distance between their respective visions becomes increasingly clear in the course of the novel.

An especially pronounced difference between Howard and Rosemary is her relatively low degree of interest in place. Rosemary has plans to "spend the whole Summer in the country," and these plans include visiting "Friends in the Thousand Islands" (pp.66-67). After leaving the Winters farm, she visits her "wealthy aunt at Grosse Point" (p. 122). Given Rosemary's preference for the quantitative rather than the qualitative, it is interesting that she plans to visit places identified by quantitative terms: the "Thousand" Islands and "Grosse," if not "gross," Point. Rosemary makes a reappearance at the Winters farm toward the end of the summer, but the reason for her return has relatively little to do with an appreciation of rural life for its own sake. She "had written to Hazel that if she found it rather dull with her Detroit relatives, she might stop off on her way home for a few days" (p. 188). Knister's portrait of Rosemary depicts her as being unable to appreciate place with any degree of sensitivity, and especially rural life, but the two are inseparable in the context of "Turning Loam." Unlike Howard, Rosemary is oblivious to the

extraordinary nature of ordinary life.

Rosemary finally represents a view of life antagonistic to the vision Howard is in the process of cultivating. With her reappearance he finds himself almost able to dismiss her, but also unable to resist adopting her attitude toward rural life; Howard thinks,

the trouble was surely himself. Yet everything had the staleness of an ever-repeated tale on a tireless phonograph. In the country people were old, with old preoccupations, calculations simple to nausea depending on the weather, the phase of the moon, states of markets, roads. "Simple." The word recalled Rosemary Count. She too left him at the moment on the bored side of indifference. (p. 211)

As Rosemary's attitude corrupts Howard's reverence for the life of the land, her language infiltrates his thought process, but he quickly becomes conscious of this and revolts at the recognition. For him, the "enigmatic question of the land" is central, but in Rosemary's presence the question takes the form of whether or not "the land should . . . possess or be possessed" (p. 212). Rosemary's world view reduces everything to calculable quantities. Howard independently searches for a vision of daily life that includes what lies beyond the "surface of toil and calculation"; in contrast, Rosemary's influence encourages him to see "calculations simple to nausea" as making up his daily life.

Toward the end of "Turning Loam," Howard decides that Rosemary is a "Charming, heartless creature." He thinks how "They had after

all not exchanged a letter" (pp. 252-253). Finally, the difference in vision between Howard and Rosemary is so great that it precludes the possibility of communication between them.

Rosemary's view of the world is inherently foreign to Howard's, as Howard finally sees. However, Howard sees Dell as embodying both what is familiar and foreign to him:

In the field he continued to see the girls walking away from him to the house, the tall form of Rosemary in the middle--she was nearly as tall as himself--by country standards dressed-up, and Hazel in a plain print dress, while Dell had effected what he thought a compromise. (pp. 32-33)

The trio of figures Howard sees from "the field," retreating to "the house," represent the choices he has concerning his domestic future.

Howard has known Dell since "school days," as her family own a farm not far from the Winters farm (p. 17). While Rosemary is careless about the land, Dell is caring, and this difference distinguishes Dell from Rosemary and associates Dell with Howard.

The source of Dell's information about local history is her grandfather (p. 27). Howard's grandfather was also a pioneer settler of the locality and, like Dell, Howard values the generation-spanning relation of his family to the land:

He had never considered himself apart from the farm life of his father, or his grandfather who had come to Essex a hundred years before and cleared the land from the bush. (p. 89)

Howard and Dell have more in common than family history. Details in

the novel associate Dell with springtime. Her last name is "Greene," which can evoke the season of either spring or summer. But when the Greene farm makes its first appearance in the novel, the lane leading to the house is "rutted still from the spring rains" (p. 64), and Howard thinks that Dell has a "springing little walk" (p. 66). The association of Dell with springtime provides a context for the presentation of her vision as a vital or positive one. Howard's last name is Winters; Howard is "prone to remember the returning Autumn and Winter" (p. 88) in his attachment to the land. The last names of Howard and Dell reflect their respective attachments to different but complementary visions.

Early in "Turning Loam," Howard's mother explains to Rosemary that Dell is "literary" and "spends her time writing for the papers" (pp. 4-5). Howard sees Dell as "a girl who in less than a year had attracted something beyond local attention as a newspaper critic of books." (p. 12).

When Howard takes Rosemary for a drive, the landscape bores her. But when Howard takes Dell for a drive, she remarks, "You know, driving a long way through the country makes me . . . full of the sense of all this living." She laughingly identifies her feeling as "the pang of the would-be artist." Howard takes her comments rather seriously:

"Perhaps there will come an artist of some sort to make this significant, even to the people themselves?"

She smiled. "Yes, that should be the

prayer of every good Canadian, 'Give us a few artists in exchange if need be for a few hundreds of these useful lawyers, dentists, agricultural representatives. For without artists Canada can have no voice in the spirit.' But the artist himself will have to be strong to stand free of indifference and the dollar-hunt." (pp. 131-132)

While Rosemary can speak of such subjects as farming "indifferently" (p. 59), Dell declares "indifference" and materialism to be what the Canadian artist must resist. There is symbolic indication of Howard's assent to Dell's vision of the artist giving "voice" to Canadian life. Central images in "Turning Loam" evoke Howard's association of the raising of corn and the cultivation of vision. As he tells Dell, "'I read your reviews,'" he looks "over a field of tasselled corn" (p. 135). When on his way to visit Dell, Howard sees his father leading a horse "hauling a jag of suckers . . . pulled from the green corn" and can "almost hear the rustle of the stalks" (p. 199). At a symbolic level, Howard repeatedly assents to Dell's vision of Canadian art.

What Dell can offer Howard, and Rosemary cannot, is a means of moving toward defining the vision he seeks. What Howard struggles toward is an acute sense of vision, and that is precisely Dell's gift:

She sighed. "Yes; when all is said it is a different world--in books." Dell pondered. "It used to be that only the great masters let themselves go. Now there are many who tear through whatever inhibitions they think bind them, and try to tell what they know. But for

us--our obsession with constraints--that makes it natural perhaps that our novels have ended where those of other countries begin."

"You may say that," he replied with brutal abruptness, "Yet if I were to put my arm around you now you'd--"

"Yes but you see that is where the confusion comes, between art and life. As though art were made as a photograph, instead of as a vision."

Howard saw this and did not see it. (p. 135)

Dell insists that the verisimilitude of a "photograph" is one thing, and the "vision" of "art" quite another. Her comment, beyond being a generality that echoes the specific terms as well as the substance of remarks Knister makes in his non-fiction, provides a sharp focus for the way in which "Turning Loam" works at a symbolic level.

Howard copes well with the details of everyday life--he has scientific and practical knowledge of farming. While he can see the "surface of toil and calculation," he knows that, in order to achieve a vision of everyday life, he must go beyond the "surface" of appearances. Dell is "literary" and claims that "art" is "made . . . as a vision." Despite his struggle toward a vision, Howard cannot quite grasp Dell's comment. At the symbolic level, it would make sense that in "Turning Loam" the union of Howard and Dell occur, for, if Howard can "see" the reality of daily life as a "photograph," he is sympathetic toward the attainment of a vision of daily life, while Dell can "see" the reality of "vision" that art expresses, but is also sympathetic toward recognizing the reality of daily experience.

While Howard struggles to move beyond an exclusively photographic

understanding of reality, or to "see" both tangible and intangible realities, Dell feels the need to avoid exclusive preoccupation with the visionary reality of art. Howard asks Dell about her "writing," and she replies:

"I sometimes wish that I were a man, so that, on a farm, I wouldn't have so much time. But as for publishing, I've a poem in Poetry this month.

"You a poet-ess? Why, that's great. I know Poetry. Can't say I see it regularly, used to read it in the Library."

"It was funny though: I offered that poem, and others I've had accepted, to nearly all the Canadian magazines, and they would none of them."

"Well," said Howard lightly, "A prophet in her own country, you know."

"Yes, but--" she was serious. "It's so disconcerting to find old saws like those so literally and banally true. It seems to be that way with all kinds of creative work in Canada, if it has any freshness." (pp. 183-184)

Knister had a poem, "The Hawk," published in Poetry in the year 1924,<sup>20</sup> the same year as Waddington states that Knister wrote "Turning Loam." Knister may include the detail of Dell's having a poem appear in Poetry in order to link his own views with hers. According to Dell, the "aim of literature" is to "make us live more abundantly, through a spiritual contemplation,--a removal, I mean, which allows us to feel" (p. 203). Dell claims that the "aim of literature" is a distancing that enables the evocation of emotion; art is a matter of seeing everyday life with the perspective of distance or a sense of vision.

Dell's definition of art as applied vision explicates the symbolic level of "Turning Loam" itself. In the novel, it is the artist's sense of vision that enables the celebration of the commonplace. Howard thinks of Dell's "voice, so lightly and politely, commonplace . . . with a fitful connotation of music" (p. 148).

Finally, Howard becomes "conscious of Dell's ability to extract interest, poetry, from minutiae of things diurnal" (p. 267).

Together Howard and Dell represent the two elements that, in dynamic relationship, constitute the aesthetic "Turning Loam" suggests: the continuity between verisimilitude, or recognition of tangible reality, and symbolism, or recognition of intangible reality.

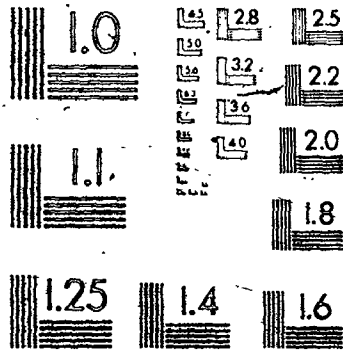
Literary allusions made in "Turning Loam" add to the many suggestions that the final union of Howard and Dell represents the wedding of two ways of seeing. Toward the end of the novel, Dell refers to Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel, Main Street, while Howard refers to the protagonist of Lewis's 1922 novel, Babbitt (pp. 269-270). In his non-fiction, Knister describes Main Street as an

attempt to achieve a microcosm of village America, with the inclusion of every detail of physical and spiritual manifestations which the author could discover. It was read by thousands, perhaps millions, and its title will probably last longer than the kind of life it symbolizes.<sup>21</sup>

Knister refers to a symbol as a reality that actually might endure longer than the reality it represents, and such a proposition echoes the view Knister assigns to Dell, that art is a matter of vision.



2



Knister writes that Main Street deals with "physical and spiritual" realities, and in "Turning Loam" has Dell argue that the "aim of literature" is to "make us live more abundantly, through a spiritual contemplation." Knister refers to "physical and spiritual" realities, while Dell refers to and concentrates on the latter. But Howard's attention to "physical" realities balances Dell's attention to "spiritual" realities. As "Turning Loam" draws to a close, Knister's main characters refer to Lewis novels, and Knister describes Lewis as drawing attention to both the tangibles and intangibles of everyday life. The references made to Lewis novels in "Turning Loam" imply that the union of Howard and Dell is also the symbolic uniting of attention to tangible and intangible realities.

Knister's description of a rainbow, a rainbow that appears just before Howard and Dell confess their love for each other, reiterates the idea that the union of Howard and Dell is a marriage of visions. Howard and his father see that

Outside everything seemed to be washed in a brilliant green light . . . The grass, the distant bush, everything. "Look," gestured both at once. A very broad and flat rainbow stood apparently no farther away than the end of the farm. One foot appeared to stand before a large elm at the edge of the bush, and the other in the middle of the half-prepared corn-field, smoking with warm rain. "It's double."

Over it hung a broad purple band, and then a dimmed second bow. The sunlight grew in brilliancy, and the inner bow appeared to blaze, fiery bright. Swallows vaunting high bisected it near the top, wings alight like heads of invisible arrows of silver.

"Pretty fine," Mr. Winters took off his

hat, reverently. "The bow of promise."  
Howard smiled, saying nothing. (pp. 282-283)

While the doubleness of the rainbow might refer to the union of Howard and Dell, descriptive terms suggest that the rainbow reflects the splendour of the synthesis of their visions. One "foot" of the rainbow is "at the edge of the bush" and may reflect Dell's sense that Canadian literature can include the pioneering object of voicing or expressing Canadian life with verisimilitude and, especially, vision. The other "foot" of the rainbow is "in the middle of the half-prepared corn-field" and--as cultivated corn provides the "seed" or germ of Howard's vision--may be a reflection of Howard's sense of the life of the land as worth celebration and consideration. Knister's image of a splendid rainbow brings into focus the symbolic level of the story, for the double rainbow reflects the union of the visions of Howard and Dell, or the world of the "photograph" as represented by the verisimilitude of "Turning Loam," and the symbolic level at which "Turning Loam" is a work of "vision." The time scheme of the novel, like the image of a double rainbow, suggests that the union of Howard and Dell, and their visions, is one of promise; "Turning Loam" opens in early summer (p. 23) and ends with the return of spring; as the novel closes, Howard goes to see Dell when "the earliest of the cornfields had a faint crisscrossing of lines, where the tall corn would spring in a few weeks" (p. 288). The title "Turning Loam" may be a reference to the common visionary ground that Howard and Dell finally share. As the concluding scene,



in which they express their mutual affection, opens, they are aware of the "rain-bitten loam" (p. 287) of the Greene farm. In the world of "Turning Loam," loam and love can be associated because tangibles and intangibles do not deny each other, but coexist and lend vitality to each other.

The minor characters of "Turning Loam" reiterate the outlook of the major characters they are associated with. For example, Dell's brother, Hank, is a returned soldier who fought in the First World War, and his memories of the war haunt him. For Hank, like his sister, intangible realities are inescapable. Rosemary's friend, Clea, is as materialistic as Rosemary herself. Howard's sister, Hazel, shares her brother's good-natured interest in the life of the land, if she does not seek a vision of such a life. In "Turning Loam," the minor characters reiterate the outlook of the major characters and therefore amplify Knister's treatment of different ways of seeing.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> "Back Concessions," TS, Box 11, File 13. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library; Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>3</sup> "Back Concessions," TS, Box 11, File 42. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>4</sup> "Back Concessions," TS, Box 11, File 15. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>5</sup> "Turning Loam," TS of 289 pages, Folders 37-45, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> "Back Concessions," TS, p. 136. Knister Family Papers. Courteously provided by Imogen Knister Givens.

<sup>7</sup> "The Happy Family." TS of 3 pages, Folder 60, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario.

<sup>8</sup> "The Happy Family," TS. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>9</sup> "The Happy Family," TS, Box 11, File 15. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister: a Biographical Note," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. David Arnason (Montreal: Belrock Press, 1975), p. 182.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Hugh S. Eayrs, President of Macmillan of Canada, to Raymond Knister, 27 August 1925. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>12</sup> Letter received from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, 12 December 1984.

13 Raymond Knister, "The Unrealism of Sinclair's 'Babbitt,'" rev. of Babbitt, by Sinclair Lewis, The Border Cities Star, 14 April 1923, p. 2.

14 Imogen Knister Givens courteously provided a copy of Raymond Knister's 1914-1924 reading list. Knister Family Papers.

15 Raymond Knister, "The Hawk," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 24, No. 1 (1924), p. 25.

16 Raymond Knister, "The Loading," The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West, 10, No. 1 (Jan. 1924), pp. 1-13.

17 Raymond Knister, "Five Poems," The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West, 10, No. 5 (May 1924), pp. 242-246.

18 Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister: a Biographical Note," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 177.

19 Harry Levin, "Observations on the Style of Ernest Hemingway," in Contexts of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 156.

20 Raymond Knister, "The Hawk," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, 24, No. 1 (1924), p. 25.

21 Raymond Knister, "The Why of Realism," The New Outlook, 15 September 1926, p. 14, col. 1.

## Chapter IV White Narcissus: Visions of Reality

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

The novel White Narcissus was published in 1929 by Macmillan in Toronto, Harcourt, Brace in New York, and Jonathan Cape in London. White Narcissus was reprinted once, in 1962, in McClelland and Stewart's New Canadian Library series. The reprint omits Knister's notation of the places and dates of composition with which the first edition ends: "Northwood, Ontario, Oct.-Dec. 1925--Hanlan's Point, June-Aug. 1927."<sup>2</sup> (Northwood, Ontario is east of Chatham, near Kent Bridge; Hanlan's Point is on Toronto Island, Ontario.)

Different unpublished versions of White Narcissus exist. "White Narcissus," a typescript of one hundred and seventy-six pages, is among the Raymond Knister Papers at McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.<sup>3</sup> The paper of this version has the watermark, "Progress Bond, Made in Canada."<sup>4</sup> A typed notation at the foot of the last page reads, "Raymond Knister, / Northwood, Ontario, / January 29, 1926." This double-spaced typescript includes frequent, if brief, handwritten revisions which clarify descriptions of character and landscape. For example, the typed sentence, "Milne turned on his heel

and walked down the lane to the road," after handwritten revision reads, "A thrill of elation under his thoughts, Milne turned on his heel and walked down the lane to the road" (p. 106). A cloud "boundaried by a silver edge" is, after handwritten revision, a cloud "boundaried by a quicksilver edge" (p. 132). "White Narcissus" is substantially briefer than the published version of the novel. Long passages which, in White Narcissus, establish character, either through thought sequences or dialogue, do not appear in this early version. The memories the protagonist, Richard Milne, has of the parents of his beloved Ada, the Lethens (pp. 60-62), do not appear in "White Narcissus," and neither does Richard's conversation with Carson Hymerson, dialogue which reflects the latter's growing exasperation with the Lethens. (pp. 106-107). A fragment, which is part of a manuscript version of the McMaster "White Narcissus," became available in January, 1984.<sup>5</sup> The fragment runs from pages eighty-one to one hundred and sixty-three, and corresponds to roughly the latter half of the published version (pp. 73-125). The paper of this fragment bears the watermark "Progress Bond."<sup>6</sup> A neat copy of the McMaster "White Narcissus" typescript is in The Raymond Knister Collection of Victoria University Library.<sup>7</sup> The paper of this typescript has the watermark "Progress Bond."<sup>8</sup> A typed notation at the foot of the final page reads, "Raymond Knister, / Northwood, Ontario" (p. 176). The concluding notation, like the extreme neatness of the text, suggests that this version may have been prepared for submission for publication.



A two hundred and sixty-five page manuscript version of "White Narcissus" is in The Raymond Knister Collection of Victoria University Library.<sup>9</sup> This manuscript's paper has the watermark "Progress Bond."<sup>10</sup> "June 6, 1927" appears in the upper left corner of the first page, and on the final page is the notation, "June 6 - August 7, 1927. / 2 Drafts / Copying completed Aug. 18 / Raymond Knister". (p. 265). The differences between this version and the published work are of a minor order: for example, a "parting bon mot" (p. 28) becomes a "parting sally" (p. 31) in the final version. Again, sharper characterization is the effect of revisions; in the manuscript version, Richard uses "monosyllables," "rather than be drawn into conventional insincerities of manner" (pp. 112-3), but in the published version his preference is keener, for he is "not to be drawn into conventional insincerities of manner" (p. 70).

The final draft of "White Narcissus" is a typescript among the Knister papers at Queen's University Archives.<sup>11</sup> This version has paper of different watermarks: "Glasgow Bond," "Progress Bond," and "Luxor Bond."<sup>12</sup> Knister's epigraph to the novel, "'Feelings and un wisdom make all men kin.' / -- Friederich Freska," is a handwritten addition on the title page of this version. On the lower left corner of the title page is the typed notation, "Raymond Knister, / 23 West Island Drive, Hants Point, / Toronto, Canada." The middle line is crossed out, and a handwritten substitution made: "Care The Macmillan Co. of Canada." The last page has the handwritten notation, "Northwood,

Ontario, Oct.-Dec. 1925 -- Hanlan's Point, June-Aug. 1927." Minor handwritten revisions that appear in this version are incorporated in the published work. For example, the typed comment, "that Mrs. Lethen "plays with" narcissi, is, after handwritten revision, the observation that "she worships the narcissi" (p. 209).

A crucial scene of White Narcissus appears as a typewritten addition in this version. The single paragraph on page "181a," which corresponds to the third-last paragraph of chapter eleven in the published work (p. 108), describes Richard's response to reading The Scarlet Letter. Prior to this revision, Richard's available reading material still consists of magazines, The Scarlet Letter, Wilhelm Meister, and "Bunin's stories" (p. 181). However, before Knister made the addition, his protagonist reads Wilhelm Meister, rather than The Scarlet Letter.

A fragmentary version of "White Narcissus" surfaced in January, 1984.<sup>13</sup> In this version, as in the other unpublished ones, "White Narcissus" appears at the top of each page. This typescript is a seven page fragment of an eleven page short story, of which pages two, four, six and nine are missing. The paper of this version "has no watermark but has faint blue lines ruled on verso."<sup>14</sup> Unlike the novel, in which the point of view is Richard's but the narration third person, this version of "White Narcissus" has first-person narration. The story has the same basic plot as the novel. However, the story is primarily dialogue between Richard and Ada. The first-person narration gives the effect of a strange immediacy; the narrator

calls his own "tone" "almost maudlin" (p. 5), believes his own words to be "banal" (p. 7), and sees Ada as a victim of a "foul old corpse of rancour" (p. 10). This fragment may reflect Knister's wish to experiment with technique, and to do so while using material that was already very familiar to him from the processes of revising and copying.

In a letter of 11 December 1928, to the English publisher of White Narcissus, Jonathan Cape, Knister explains that "the Macmillan Company of Canada" accepted the novel for publication in the autumn of 1927.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. The Action

The protagonist, Richard Milne, a successful writer of novels and advertisements, returns to visit the rural area in which he grew up, determined to make a final attempt to win the hand of Ada Lethen. Ada, however, hesitates to leave her farm home because her parents are not on speaking terms. In fact, her mother lavishes attention not on any person, but on the narcissus flowers she grows indoors. As Ada can communicate with both parents, and fears the consequences of her absence, she feels it her duty to remain at the Lethen farm. In the course of the novel, Richard boards at two farms in the area. At first, Richard stays with Carson Hymerson and his wife. However, Carson's wish to foreclose the mortgage on the Lethen farm alienates Richard, who leaves the Hymerson farm to stay with the Burnstiles.

Bill Burnstile, a longstanding friend of Richard's, is conspicuously more relaxed and good-natured than Carson Hymerson. White Narcissus ends with the removal of barriers to the departure of Ada with Richard: Carson succumbs to mental illness, and the Lethens are once more on speaking terms as the novel closes.

### 3. Influences and Sources

There is evidence that the myth of Narcissus and the influence of nineteenth-century American romance lie behind White Narcissus. Knister's adaptation of these sources creates a polarity between the narrowly obsessive vision and the broader vision that admits the complexity of reality.

As Jay Macpherson notes,

In the simplest form of his story, Narcissus is a beautiful youth who either pines away and dies for love of his own image reflected in a spring or river, or drowns trying to grasp it.<sup>16</sup>

Macpherson explains that Ovid added to the myth of Narcissus the figure of "Echo, the nymph despised by him who at last fades away to nothing but an answering voice" (p. 76). In White Narcissus, Knister makes diffuse use of the Narcissus myth; his characters do not strictly conform to the configuration of Narcissus, his reflection, and Echo. However, the myth of Narcissus serves as a source for Knister's use of the narcissus as symbol, and Knister draws on the

essential meaning of the myth--the harmful consequences of self-absorption or obsessive selfishness.

Balancing the narcissism of the negative characters in White Narcissus is the openness of mind Richard strives to live by, an attitude that, in the course of the novel, becomes associated with nineteenth-century American romance. Textual evidence suggests that reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter: A Romance is not gratuitous in White Narcissus, but the touchstone of Richard's desire to acknowledge the myriad manifestations of reality. For similar reasons, White Narcissus includes oblique references to Melville's Moby-Dick and James's The Ambassadors. At the time of writing "Turning Loam," Knister expressed an interest in the realities of symbol and vision. By the time Knister wrote White Narcissus, his fiction and non-fiction came to reflect a respect for the recognition of intangible realities that permeate nineteenth-century American romance.

#### 4. Context

Knister began the writing of White Narcissus while working on his family's farm. By the time Knister finished work on White Narcissus, he had embarked both on working at writing full time, and marriage. White Narcissus was completed at "The Poplars," the cottage at Hanlan's Point, Toronto Island, where Knister and his wife spent their first summer of married life.

Between 1925 and 1927, the years in which Knister wrote White Narcissus, his work won increasing recognition. The Midland continued to publish his work; the poems "Dog and Cat" and "Martyrdom" appeared in the April issue of The Midland in 1925.<sup>17</sup> This Quarter, an American expatriate magazine based in Paris, in 1925 published Knister's short story "Elaine,"<sup>18</sup> and in the next issue appeared Knister's short story, "The Fate of Mrs. Lucier,"<sup>19</sup> as well as the serial poem, "A Row of Horse Stalls."<sup>20</sup> Other contributors to these issues of This Quarter were Carl Sandburg, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway.

In terms of the context of White Narcissus, a particularly interesting acknowledgement of Knister's work was the recognition given his short story, "The Strawstack." Edward J. O'Brien, in his annual devoted to the short story, placed "The Strawstack" on the "Roll of Honour" for stories published in North America between October, 1923 and September, 1924 (other works O'Brien lists in his "Roll of Honour" include stories by Ernest Hemingway and Ruth Suckow).<sup>21</sup> "The Strawstack" appeared in the October issue of The Canadian Forum in 1923,<sup>22</sup> and in his essay, "Canadian Literati," Knister refers to his story published in The Canadian Forum as being "obviously derived from Poe."<sup>23</sup> "Canadian Literati" was not published until 1975, but the essay can be roughly dated, as it includes a reference to a 1929 work of Morley Callaghan's, A Native Argosy (p. 166). Knister, therefore, acknowledged the influence of American romance on his work at approximately the time White Narcissus was published. And by the

time Knister started work on White Narcissus, a work he explicitly stated to be "derived from Poe" had been singled out for recognition.

Evidence points to Knister's general interest in nineteenth-century American romance. For example, Knister's reading list for the years 1914 to 1924 reveals a consistent interest in the work of Henry James; Knister read The American in 1916, The Europeans in 1922, and Daisy Miller, The Ambassadors and "The Author of Beltraffio" in 1923. Knister's reading list also reflects an interest in Hawthorne's work; Knister read The Marble Faun and The Scarlet Letter in 1918, and re-read The Scarlet Letter in 1919.<sup>24</sup> By the time he wrote "Canadian Literati," Knister associated the highly symbolic work of the American romance writers with coming "to grips with reality":

Let it not be assumed that the only expression I advocate has to do with wheat fields and stock yards. I am only pointing out that we probably will have to come to grips with reality before we shall have a literature, before Canada will mean something to the Canadian besides his own personal experience. Our next great writer may be of a different stamp altogether. If any Canadian equals . . . Moby Dick in like or unlike exotic fields there will be no objection from anybody. Or if he can be as Canadian as Poe was American he may create his own world. ("Canadian Literati," pp. 167-8)

Knister's observation links his interest in American nineteenth-century romance to the position he gives his artist character in "Turning Loam," Dell Greene, when she states that art is more a matter of vision than the production of a strictly photographic kind of verisimilitude. The inclination of Knister towards the work of

Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and James reveals an inclination towards fictional worlds which accommodate the realities of symbol and vision, as well as the realities of place and material circumstances.

White Narcissus shows signs of going beyond the verisimilitude of a photograph, and Knister's correspondence with Thomas Murtha adds to this suggestion. Murtha and Knister were contemporaries who shared the struggle to publish fiction which balances attention to tangible and intangible realities. Like Knister's, Murtha's writing balances attention to the realities of the mind and heart with attention to the more material, regionalist realities of place.

In a letter dated July 31, 1929, Murtha writes to Knister:

So you got some funny reviews of White Narcissus. I hope to see them. I saw one in the Can. Forum a few days ago; they said you were descended from Nat. Hawthorne and that you were refreshing in that you represented an aspect of writing different to other American (in the broad sense of the word) writers, especially to Mr. Callaghan. I hesitate to get into such a biological discussion as to whether you are an evolution of Nat., but I do know you are considerably different to M.C. I think I'm not telling you any news.<sup>25</sup>

Murtha implies that Knister would, as the author of White Narcissus, rejoice in being recognized as "descended from Nat. Hawthorne." As Murtha was Knister's colleague and friend, his opinion carries a special authority, and his opinion accords with the inclination toward American nineteenth-century romance that Knister's non-fiction reflects.



In his preface to The American--which is the first James novel that appears in Knister's 1914-1924 reading list--James defines the "romantic" as standing

for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.<sup>26</sup>

In an unpublished and untitled short story, Knister describes the effect of a poet's lines as follows:

They were very moving, haunting, they awoke memories and desires long forgotten, and they had a yearning toward the unseizable beauty which sometimes we all descry passing across our horizon.<sup>27</sup>

The "unseizable beauty" Knister writes of is, perhaps, the "romantic" of which James speaks, or that which may be experienced "only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire." This sort of romance--the romance with which the American romance writers of the nineteenth century were concerned--provides an entry to the world of Knister's White Narcissus. Knister's fiction acknowledges the "unseizable beauty" as well as the more sinister but equally "unseizable" intangibles of reality. In "Canadian Literati," Knister praises Moby-Dick, a work of American romance, in which a passage occurs that focuses on the "unseizable":

And still deeper the meaning of that story

of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.<sup>28</sup>

Melville's passage, if read as a delineation of the role of the writer of romance, gives a bleaker view than that of James; that knowable through the "beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire" gives way to what is simply "unseizable" or "ungraspable." The writer of romance must be alert to the fate of Narcissus, lest he share it, for if Narcissus faces his own "tormenting, mild image," the writer confronts "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life." The writer can evoke the "ungraspable," or elude the restrictions of a photograph-like verisimilitude, by evocation, allusion, and references to symbols and myths--as Melville himself does in describing Narcissus. In White Narcissus, there is evidence that the myth of Narcissus and allusion to nineteenth-century American romance are of central importance.

##### 5. Critical Reception

Reviews of White Narcissus repeatedly note the importance of the novel's atmosphere. In his 23 February 1929 review, in The New Statesman, Cyril Connolly describes White Narcissus as a "wistful little love story," that is "mildly sophisticated."<sup>29</sup> The Times

Literary Supplement review of 28 February 1929 states that the novel "depends upon" the "psychological situation" that exists at the Lethen household. No specific symbolic meaning is assigned to the narcissi that Mrs. Lethen tends, but it is said that she "broods increasingly over these lovely, plain [sic] flowers, which are given a character that is undeservedly sinister."<sup>30</sup> J.D. Robins, in his review in The Canadian Forum of August, 1929, suggests that the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne appears in White Narcissus. Robins also calls attention to the novel's evocation of "atmosphere."<sup>31</sup> The New York Times Book Review of 25 August 1929 describes White Narcissus as a "supremely atmospheric story," and adds that the "somber atmosphere" of "the Lethen household . . . is symbolized by Mrs. Lethen's white narcissi." "Knister's prose" is said to be "an excellent medium" for expressing "emotional attitudes."<sup>32</sup> The Bookman (New York) of October, 1929, notes that "Mrs. Lethen's very soul seems to have been absorbed into the white narcissus" plants she tends, and "Whether symbolic or realistic, an atmosphere of gloom such as Mr. Knister has attempted to create . . . is very difficult to achieve."<sup>33</sup> According to the review in the New York Herald Tribune of 20 October 1929, the Lethens "bind as well as bend" Ada's "soul," until the destruction of the narcissi that are Mrs. Lethen's "one passion." Richard's wooing of Ada is "not a brilliant liberation," for "The stilted fellow was a very Hamlet for wordy inactivity."<sup>34</sup> The review in the 2 November 1929 Boston Evening Transcript describes White Narcissus as a "spiritual drama," which includes such elements as the "mysterious

atmosphere of Ada," and "Mrs. Lethen's passion" for white narcissi. Knister receives praise for having "drawn his characters with a deft hand."<sup>35</sup>

Two camps of critical thought exist concerning White Narcissus. Some critics place stress on the verisimilitude of the work, while other critics see the work as moving beyond a photograph-like verisimilitude.

In The Literary History of Canada, Desmond Pacey describes White Narcissus as being

far from perfect, but its treatment of Ontario farm life, and especially its capacity to recreate the atmosphere of the Ontario rural landscape, makes it more memorable [than My Star Predominant]. The plot is involved and sometimes incredible, the characters are weird but powerful, and the style is a curious combination of simple directness and pretentious double-talk. We feel in this novel . . . that he is wrestling with language, trying to put it into the posture which will be suitable for his own purposes. He can, at his best, write . . . directly and simply . . . . On the other hand, Knister can be guilty of over writing . . . .<sup>36</sup>

Pacey praises the verisimilitude of White Narcissus, but he implies that the novel is oddly heterogeneous in plot, characterization, and style. The inclusion of more than photograph-like verisimilitude would explain why the work leaves the impression of including an elusive diversity.

In his introduction to the 1962 reprint of White Narcissus in the New Canadian Library series, Philip Child also praises Knister's

powers of description; "the depicting of the Ontario country landscape and the life and manners and atmosphere of living in the farmland are the staples of his best writing."<sup>37</sup> Child refers to Knister's fondness for "the Ontario countryside," "with its variety and its changing aspects which often seem to reflect our moods" (p. 7), but adds,

What certainly does go beyond the book's cover to reverberate pleasantly in the reader's memory, is the description of nature making its impact on Richard Milne's mind in his various moods . . . . (Child, p. 13)

He sees Knister as describing "the face of the land with power and simplicity" (p. 11). But seeing the novel as a work of verisimilitude does not help account for the central symbol of the novel:

though the White Narcissus [sic] is meant to be the central symbol of the novel and though it gives the book its title, it is static. Once planted in the story it does not grow and help to move the plot forward or deepen its significance. Indeed it does not again enter the plot until the abrupt and almost perfunctory ending of the story. There it is brought in by the author in order that the rebellious destruction of the narcissi by Mr. Lethen may . . . surprise Mrs. Lethen into speech . . . and thus restore, presumably, a normal married relationship between them. . . . (Child, p. 13)

Child notes that "in verse or prose, Knister's originality lies in bringing to life . . . an atmosphere in which realism . . . combines with realism's own kind of poetry" (p. 13).

Glenn Clever views White Narcissus as a work flawed by a lack of structure and artistic control. In his article, "Point of View in White Narcissus," he claims that "Knister has little control over point of view."<sup>38</sup> Clever states that the narrative "voice shifts disconcertingly around," and notes that this

shows plainly in the way Knister designates his characters. He terms the protagonist variously "Richard Milne," "he," "Milne," (p. 25); "Richard" (p. 30); "the younger man" (pp. 28-29); "the young man" (p. 50); even "the man" (p. 33)--just as he designates both Bill Burnstfle (p. 22) and Mr. Hymerson (p. 49). Such ambiguous distancing between reader and character jolts . . . . (p. 120)

Clever concludes:

the novel draws to a close with almost a fusion of their [Richard's and Ada's] consciousnesses, not as a necessary result of preliminary preparation, but fortuitously and without accumulative aesthetic impact.

White Narcissus deserves to be admired as a fine novel of mood and poetic description and as a turning point in the course of the Canadian novel from external to internal viewpoint; but it does leave the reader with a sense of dissatisfaction when he has finished it, and one of the main reasons for this is the lack of adequate control of point of view. (p. 123)

Clever, like Pacey and Child, basically sees White Narcissus as a flawed work of photographic realism. But the novel was not always viewed as a limited realist work. Another view of the work exists, and this view existed in the twenties.

In his 1929 review of the novel, J.D. Robins comments of Knister,

If he does anywhere in the book show one of the two influences which are regarded as unavoidable, it is an American one, that of Nathaniel Hawthorne. (p. 390)

Robins concludes by reiterating the suggestion that White Narcissus may include elements of romance:

In its objective and descriptive aspects, White Narcissus is a fine performance with an atmosphere which is new in English-Canadian fiction. In its portrayal of countryside life it strikes a note which is idyllic without being mawkish or untrue, a convincing note of knowledge. Its psychology and its plot seem to be both inadequately worked out, as if the book had attempted too much for its compass. It is this which appears . . . to lie behind the blurred sifting of the girl's character through the uncertain mind of her lover; it is this which seems to underlie the insufficiently prepared solution. But, after all, plot and exact character analysis are not the essentials of the book. Its value and its appeal lie in the quiet atmospheric triumph of its shadowed centre and in the bright realism of its circumference. (p. 390)

Paul Denham's more recent discussion develops the ideas that Robins delineates. Denham notes parallels between White Narcissus and The Scarlet Letter, but interprets these as being of episodic or tangential, rather than central, significance:

Richard compares himself with Arthur Dimmesdale in that both men are victims of excessive introspection and paralysis of the will . . . . Having fixed The Scarlet Letter in our minds, Knister goes on to . . . a climactic scene between Ada and Richard which takes place in a

forest and is strongly reminiscent of Hawthorne's forest scene in which Hester Prynne persuades Dimmesdale to leave the place of his guilt and seek a new life. In Hawthorne's story, the forest symbolizes freedom from social codes. In White Narcissus, it is Richard who does the persuading (the earlier parallel with Dimmesdale is not pursued); and the forest, like the earlier "choked vistas" of the countryside, becomes a symbol of constraint . . . .<sup>39</sup>

According to Denham, allusion to The Scarlet Letter does not have a significant structural role in White Narcissus. Nevertheless, Denham concludes,

White Narcissus, then, is not simply a realistic novel. . . . Knister juxtaposes the reality of the Burnstiles with the reality of the Lethens . . . a workaday, predictable world and a . . . desperate, senseless one. In doing so, he moves "beyond realism." . . . In fact, Knister's strength is in his willingness to make use of several modes to suggest a complex vision of the world. (p. 77)

Critical opinion concerning White Narcissus often hesitates to take into account Knister's inclination toward the fictional worlds of Hawthorne and other American writers of romance.

## II. White Narcissus

White Narcissus is an elusive novel because questions of vision are at the core of the work. Textual evidence suggests that, in White Narcissus, there is a central tension between the narrowly obsessive or narcissistic vision and the broadly inclusive vision that



works of nineteenth century American romance celebrate. Knister's treatment of landscape introduces the topic of vision, while allusion to romance brings into focus the subject of vision.

White Narcissus begins, "Richard Milne was only two hours away from the city," but he finds the road he follows "incredibly foreign," and the road leads him to "the centre of lost wastes screened by scattered and fretful trees." He soon feels "lost in this too-familiar country" (p. 19). Richard sees the road he follows as leading toward "lost wastes," and feels himself "lost." The first paragraph of the novel suggests that Richard's view of the landscape determines its presentation.

Richard arrives from the city with an "impulsive consciousness of nothing but the goal" of seeing Ada Lethen:

He must see Ada Lethen, though it were for the last time. Now, alone on the windy road, he began to hesitate, to wonder. The fields, river banks, the astounding, overwhelming sky he seemed to have forgotten, questioned him as an alien. What was he doing there? And what good, he further asked himself, would his coming do? (p. 20)

As Richard questions the good of his return, he sees the "fields, river banks" and the "sky" as similarly questioning him. Here, as in the initial conjunction of Richard's feeling "lost," and seeing the road he is on as leading to "lost wastes," his environment mirrors his feelings; the landscape he sees becomes a reflection of his own mood.

As Richard approaches the "Lethen place,"

The wind was dying before the sunset, but had chilled, turning up the under sides of leaves. Trees shivered under a dulled sky. The evening, muted by wind and cold, given a sudden swiftness of animation, mated the feeling of Richard Milne. (p. 32)

Richard again projects his mood onto the landscape. The relationship between Richard's feelings and his view of the landscape is so close that he defines the reason for his return as the land calling him back:

it all came back to him, fields and years, more poignant at every yard he traversed, and he knew that he could never be freed from the hold of this soil, however far from it he had travelled; though he were never to be called back by itself, but by a forfeit of love which in final desperation he had come to redeem or tear from its roots forever. (p. 21)

In the course of White Narcissus, as Richard's feelings fluctuate according to Ada's degree of acceptance of him, the landscape he sees reflects his changing feelings. The colouration of the physical world of the novel becomes dependent upon the likely "outcome of his quest" (p. 36) for Ada's hand. He sees remembered details of the history of their relationship as making "a medium through which translucently to see Ada Lethen--an image of sleet frozen upon maple buds" (p. 38). At least one other character whom Richard perceives positively is, in terms of Richard's imagination, planted in the environment; he sees his friend, the farmer Bill Burnstile, as seeming "to take root in the ground" (p. 53).

Richard's habit of seeing, or envisioning, the landscape as reflecting his feelings pervades the story. After listening to Bill Burnstile opine that the Lethens "don't seem livin'" (p. 57), Richard feels that "Somehow the day had become overcast for him" (p. 58). But shortly afterwards, while walking with Ada, Richard sees the morning as "passing in a mellow green quiet" that is nonetheless for him "loud" with the "clamour" of "his awakened hopes, a tumult of memories and desire" (p. 59). While on this walk, after thinking of Ada as "inaccessible music" (p. 62), Richard sees an inaccessible knoll, a

place for shelter from too rough winds, from sun, and all noise and unquiet they looked into; but there seemed no path leading down to it. (p. 63)

Once again, nature responds to feeling; an unreachable shelter Richard notices is the landscape's counterpart to the apparently insoluble emotional dilemma he faces.

The landscape from which Ada's father emerges, to make his first appearance in the novel, presumably also reflects Richard's state of mind:

over the fence was a gloom of trees, dark even now beyond a clearing minaretted by mulleins. The shadowed oaks and maples seemed darkened thickly, and even with their flourish of green somehow old and cool, wintry. And before them, in the clearing among the slender spires of mullein, stood a human figure. (p. 82)

Mr. Lethen, whose behaviour constitutes an obstacle as far as Richard's

"quest" for Ada goes, first appears in the novel emerging from a clump of weeds and "wintry trees." In approaching Richard, Mr. Lethen appears to "sidle" around "mulleins, fallen logs," and "a huge ant-city." His question, "'You are Alma Milne's son, aren't you?'" prompts Richard's "Memories of childhood and a dark country back of that" (pp. 82-83).

As Richard's hopes stagnate, the summer passes, and "the long-desired rains of spring belatedly arrived to confound summer prospects"; "The days were warm, even during the heaviest rains, the sun bright and ardent immediately after. Too bright, too warm" (p. 103). Among the "corn and rank-tobacco" grow "matted weeds" (p. 104). In a highly evocative image, Knister conjures the riotous, rank, almost cloying fertility of the landscape that Richard perceives:

the crops were being smothered with weeds . . . .  
 Something in this rhythmic replenishing of  
 the fecund and steaming earth calmed Richard  
 Milne without quite pleasing him . . . .  
 Along the river . . . the rank vegetation  
 smothered the raw outlines of the ground.  
 In the swamp a forest, a pond of nettles higher  
 than a man's head waved acridly, wavered and  
 bowed like long trees, fern-like, in the light-  
 breeze, some recoiling more quickly than  
 others, jostling and bowing back and forth  
 to each other. They had a symbolic malevolence,  
 a blue-green sea of fire, and Richard Milne  
 watched it for moments without thinking. (p. 104)

The highly evocative image of enormous nettles reflects, with "symbolic malevolence," Richard's knowledge of his recourse to

frustrating inaction in response to Ada's rejection. As biblical references to a "lake of fire" (Rev. 19-20) and a "sea . . . of fire" (Rev. 15.2) appear in Revelation, Knister's use of the phrase "sea of fire" emphasizes the depiction of landscape according to mood, rather than a photographic realism. In the nettles image, natural circumstances--like the circumstances of the Lethen household--conspire to hold Richard in sway, in a trance of futility. A stupendous natural fertility mocks Richard, as Ada's denial foils him:

Sumach grew densely along moist ditches, rank, with stalks as thick as a man's arm, little groves towering branchless twenty feet, at that height to spread a thick thatch of green which withstood light showers: it was like tropical vegetation. That year the elderberries grew thick and weighty on brittle stalks, changing from discs of cream frothiness to dark, pendulous spheres of fruit, purple, which almost seemed to swell with the increasing rains.

This richness of greenery, and bitter yellow, blue-grey stems, purple fruit, stretched above his head, seeming to bury his consciousness as he walked about . . . . The man would stop and sit . . . under the canopy of sumach and stare at the ground, black earth strewn with rusty stems of the sumach leaves of other years, thinking of those times and of Ada Lethen, while the rain began to patter unheeded above him. (pp. 104-5)

The season's smothering wealth of vegetation is another choking reminder of the poverty of his prospects in his quest for Ada. At his initial meeting with Ada on this visit, Richard thinks of the "few . . . vistas" she has seen as he asks her, "'What is it holds you, Ada?' . . . in a choking tone" (p. 36), and he sees the landscape as "A place of choked vistas" (p. 20). Richard speaks to Ada in a

"choking tone" (p. 118) after she admits to loving him, but still refuses to leave with him. As the rain patters "unheeded above him," he thinks first of Ada, and then of his being immobilized by indecision, showing himself "a veritable Hamlet" (p. 105); presumably for similar reasons his vision causes him to see "a cliff of cloud the shape of the map of Denmark" (p. 114). Richard's frustration shapes the very clouds he sees. As he tries to lose himself in work by helping on the Burnstile farm, he sees the "oats field and the gloomy light" as "curiously lethargic in their tranquillity," and "even the forests seemed to toss with a heavy, slow resignation" (p. 115). Catching sight of Ada, he stops her; as soon as Ada's "musical voice" greets him, it becomes a "glorious day" (p. 116). Following Ada's confession of her love for him, when they walk in the forest, "every leaf" moves "in ecstasy" (p. 120). After they consummate their love, Richard no longer sees clouds the shape of the map of Denmark, but a sky "blue with thronging white clouds" (p. 127). Now, instead of stagnation, Richard sees "fulfilment" in the "passing of the summer" (p. 127). Whereas Ada's rejection of Richard leads to a "dissatisfaction" that spreads "to include all things without and within him" (p. 100), in the consummation of their love, Richard and Ada create "an ecstasy," "only to find it again in . . . a suddenly cognizant universe" (p. 125). Richard's "ecstasy"--like his "dissatisfaction"--eventually includes the "universe," or "all things without and within him."

Richard's state of mind colours the landscape he sees or, in other words, his subjective vision determines the landscape presented.

The subject of vision receives further attention in the serial presentation of obsessive, and finally narcissistic, characters.

The most prominently obsessive character in White Narcissus is Mrs. Lethen. Richard first sees her, in the time span the novel covers, while "bent over a vase of white narcissi":

Other vases of the glowing white flower lent a distilled radiance to the dusk of the room. It seemed . . . that a sickly, heavy odor came . . . through the air . . . the woman . . . appeared unconscious of everything but the flowering bulbs. Her fingers caressed a blossom, and she passed to the other side of the room to look at a bulb just breaking into bud . . . She gazed a long time at this one, and long at one wilting with the accomplishment of its short life. (p. 40)

In her obsession with the narcissi, Mrs. Lethen directs her emotions toward them; Ada remarks of her mother, to Richard, "She has always loved the narcissi" (p. 40). Ada adds, "she likes them, worships them":

She seems to think of nothing else from day to night. She looks at them, cares for them, she has some of them beside her when she sleeps, and first thing in the morning she comes downstairs to look at the others. I have known her to get up in the middle of the night to come downstairs . . . and look at them. Sometimes she will fall in a reverie over them and I can scarcely call her away to a meal. (p. 41)

Mrs. Lethen's obsession with narcissi is not only self-destructive; she has channeled her emotions toward the narcissi, and away from family relations, in the aftermath of a quarrel with her husband. As

Ada explains,

each thought the other unfaithful. They proved that each was certain, no matter how much the other denied it, and that they would be obliged by every human consideration to hate each other to the end of life. And they have never spoken to each other since. (p. 43)

Instead, as Ada puts it, Mrs. Lethen "seems daily to give her frail life to the white narcissi" (p. 45). Narcissi fill the house; Richard sees narcissi in the "front room," on the table, on the window-sills, and even on the sewing machine when it is not in use (pp. 66-7). Mrs. Lethen may have "burnt-out eyes" (p. 68) because hers is a minimal vision, a vision that admits only narcissi as fitting recipients of care and affection.

Richard's attack on her manner of living prompts Mrs. Lethen to reply that the narcissi give "satisfaction" to her days, and she poses the question, "If they give me the love everything and everyone else denies me, what then?" (p. 69). Her obsession with narcissi is finally a selfish one. The name Lethen evokes Lethe, the river of forgetfulness of Greek mythology; in her narcissism, Mrs. Lethen forgets or foregoes contact with others. Interestingly enough, the name Leth(e)ren, "a Devon surname,"<sup>40</sup> means thief or rogue; and Mrs. Lethen is, from Richard's viewpoint at least, precisely a thief of the promise of happiness.

Knister's choice of the narcissus as Mrs. Lethen's object of obsession is a choice that draws on the myth of Narcissus. Mrs. Lethen's sinister attachment to narcissi reflects the kind of selfish



and harmful self-absorption that the myth of Narcissus represents. Macpherson explains that Ovid added to the myth of Narcissus the figure of "Echo, the nymph despised by him who at last fades away to nothing but an answering voice" (p. 76). Mrs. Lethen's narcissistic devotion to narcissi reduces Ada to the role of Echo, for Ada becomes merely the "Echo" of parents who speak to her but refuse to speak to each other. (Knister makes Mr. Lethen, who finally breaks the marital silence, and who does not have any object of obsession, a much less sinister figure than Mrs. Lethen.) Richard remarks, while walking with Ada, that when they were children, "How vast the bush seemed, and echoey then" (p. 60). He also imagines that her father receives her "echoes of sympathy" (p. 88). After Ada declares her love for Richard, but before she explains that she still refuses to leave with him, her "words, repeated as though by an echo," leave Richard "lightheaded" (p. 118).

Knister makes flexible use of the Narcissus myth, drawing on it for the narcissus as symbol, and the essential meaning of the myth--the harmful consequences of self-absorption or obsessive selfishness.

Another obsessed character in White Narcissus is Carson Hymerson, a "small figure of a man," a local farmer who first appears in the story carrying "dripping swill pails." As Richard approaches Carson's house, he walks "over a series of long, warped boards" (p. 25). There is more "warped" about Carson than initially meets the eye.

Early in the novel Carson complains of calves breaking through a fence and, after coming from the Lethen farm, "browsing on his oats"; he calls Mr. Lethen an "old fraud" and declares, "you couldn't do

anything with him, once he got an idea in his head. Crazy, that's what he is, crazy, and he don't know it." He insists that what Mr. Lethen "ain't, is useful," because he is "past farming"; he adds, "'Good riddance if some would get out, let their land be farmed right'" (pp. 27-8).

Richard, finally "tired of the man's complaints" about Mr. Lethen's upkeep of a "haphazard rail fence" between the Hymerson and Lethen farms, suggests a solution:

"Why don't you make some settlement, say, have it that--if this is Lethen's end of the line--that the fence should be fixed by him, or, if not, that you will do so at his expense? I should think that some arrangement could be made."

But Carson evades replying to these proposals, and talk of conciliation makes him glance at Richard "in alarm." Richard finds this response puzzling, as he knows that "Hymerson would talk of his injuries to any listener, and generally comport himself as though in fact a breach existed between the neighbours" (p. 51).

Richard initially does not know that any "change" (p. 56) has made Carson obsessed with his grievances against Mr. Lethen, and so for the first part of the summer Richard finds himself boarding at the farm of a man who has, for Richard, a particularly irksome axe to grind. While boarding at the Hymersons, Richard hears Carson relate

all the wrongs he was suffering from his neighbours, particularly from Mr. Lethen; the misunderstanding of his motives when he told people how things should and could be

rūn; and prophecies of what would happen where his advice was disregarded. (p. 74)

Carson becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea that Mr. Lethen is maltreating him.

Carson's obsession with Mr. Lethen eventually erupts in violence; as one of Bill Burnstile's sons tells Richard, "they were going it hot and heavy. Fin'ly Hymerson up and hits old man Lethen," and, he adds, "knocks him for a row" in the corn field (p. 91). Richard's subsequent description of Carson as a "well-known psychological type" (p. 93) again connects the obsessed Carson and the obsessed Mrs. Lethen, for Richard similarly describes the relationship of the latter to narcissi as "pathological" (p. 41).

Carson turns his fury on Richard, making it plain that he cares neither for Mr. Lethen nor "all his friends with him" (p. 107). Carson wants to put the Lethens "on the road" (p. 90) or dispossess them, and to that end he has obtained the mortgage on the Lethen farm, and has filed suit against Lethen for the land (p. 85). His description of the Lethens as a "public nuisance" and his screaming rage make Richard suspect that this "was not the tone of the crafty mortgage holder, nor yet of Carson as he knew him" (p. 107). Towards the end of the novel, Richard learns that Carson

flew into a rage about something, and finally they got the police, and it took a bunch of them . . . . It appears he got violent. He kept hollering something about everybody being in a conspiracy against him.

Carson also screams that "Lethen is a 'stumbling block'" (p. 128). Carson's obsession, unlike Mrs. Lethen's, does not end, but intensifies. However, the resolution of his obsession, like that of Mrs. Lethen's, is a necessary preliminary to the disentanglement of Ada. As Richard tells Ada, "Now your father will be in no danger of losing his place, and you and I are free" (p. 130).

Mrs. Lethen and Carson both allow themselves to be possessed by preoccupation with one thing. Knister's short story, "The One Thing," was published in The Midland in 1922, and White Narcissus was not published until 1929, but documentation shows that Knister worked on drafts of these stories in the same year. Knister worked on White Narcissus from 1925 to 1927. At the end of the typescript of an expanded version of "The One Thing," there is typed "Northwood, Ontario / Jan. 2, 1921--Jan. 2, 1925," after which appears the handwritten addition "Early draft in The Midland, Jan. 1922."<sup>41</sup> Thus Knister was working on both White Narcissus and "The One Thing" in 1925. In "The One Thing," "the one thing" that the main character, Billy Dulckington, "cares about's his horses" (p. 3). Billy tends to "worship" (p. 33) his horses, just as Mrs. Lethen "worships" (p. 43) her narcissi. When the local veterinarian and Billy's brother show an enthusiasm for horses unequal to Billy's, he finds himself unable "to dispel a latent impression that the two larger men were somehow leagued against him" (pp. 41-42), just as Carson Hymerson seems unable to dispel the initially latent impression that "everybody" is "in a conspiracy against him" (p. 128). Carson is a "small figure of a man"

(p. 25), while Knister notes Billy's "shortness" (p. 5). Billy has an "obsession" (p. 12) with one thing. All three of these Knister characters have obsessions, and have impaired vision; Billy has "little eyes" (p. 6), Mrs. Lethen "burnt-out eyes" (p. 68), and Carson Hymerson "little" eyes (p. 31).

In White Narcissus, obsessive vision denies the broad recognition of reality that characterizes American nineteenth-century romance. Richard responds to words as "one to whom every word of magic unlocked a certain door" (p. 116). He acknowledges his own "bent toward romance in his creative efforts" (p. 105). Richard exhibits this preference in his choice of reading material as well; on the eve of the consummation of his relationship with Ada, he reads The Scarlet Letter: A Romance, a choice he makes from a selection of magazines and other books.

This choice is only one of several indications of the nature of Richard's vision. Quite early in the novel, Richard adjures Ada to consider the nature of her vision:

You are even farther removed than my own ideas are from the dogma of today. That arrivism, opportunism, at best only cloaks the thirst for getting which is rendering barren the lives we see everywhere. Materialism. Yet in a degree we've got to recognize that it is based on the reality which is foundation to material things. People get it reversed and think that material things are the only basis of reality. But it is our destiny: we are bound to conquer. We must subdue things; we've got to take from life even the emotions, the experience, and fulfillment we need. If we shirk that we are

doing a wrong as great as that of starving in the midst of nature's abundance. (p. 44)

Richard rejects materialism, and also the idea that there is "only" one "basis of reality." Knister establishes Richard's distance from obsession with "one thing" relatively early in the novel.

Knister subsequently describes Richard as "impressed anew with the true reasonableness of farm practice," in which there is "no fever for the spick and span," and

even glittering new-painted machinery soon took on protective colouring and comfortable, crude patchings. This was part of the nature of farming, and when it was overruled it was at the sacrifice of practical utility. He recalled visiting the farm of two graduates of an agricultural college, and how his expectations of a stricter formalization had been disappointed. Luckily farming did not lend itself to the simplifications of hospital wards, scientific laboratories, prisons. His experience of other departments of the modernized world led him to thank God for it. (p. 52)

For Richard, "simplifications" are reductive, in life and literature. While he admits to his "bent toward romance in his creative efforts," his is not an unthinking allegiance; when Mr. Lethen starts telling him of his difficulties with Carson, Richard recalls

the way--romantic it seemed to the real of the present--in which his writing had glossed over such differences, with all the life of which they formed a part. (p. 84)

While Richard admits his "bent" for romanticism, he consciously fights

against allowing a literary pre-conception to interfere with his perception of his experience. He admires Bill Burnstile as a man "open-eyed to what reality came in his way" (p. 58), and he can consciously make an effort to see Ada as "an uncompromising realist" (p. 98) would see her. But Richard values the multiplicity of unsimplified experience, is of a romantic "bent," and has a too lively and "never-remote literary interest" (p. 93) to forego his interest in literary romanticism--of a certain brand.

On the eve of the consummation of his love for Ada, Richard reads The Scarlet Letter:

after looking through a haphazard pile of popular magazines, he took up The Scarlet Letter, one of the three books, along with Bunin's stories and Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre, which he had brought with him: (pp. 107-8)

In his non-fiction, Knister discusses the works Richard rejects. Knister refers to the "strolling player" of long ago as being considered "at best an intellectual valet to whom the count and the baron could unburden their minds as they could not to their more materialistic equals, as in Wilhelm Meister."<sup>42</sup> Knister implies that Goethe's Wilhelm Meister stands primarily for the intangible realities that the "materialistic"--one recalls "Turning Loam"--might miss.

In his review of Ivan Bunin's The Gentleman From San Francisco and Other Stories, Knister states,

The Gentleman [sic] from San Francisco is one of those essentially simple souls who devote

themselves to the acquisition of property: simple, because the instinct for acquisition is one of the primary ones, common to animals and to prehistoric man. It was only when thoughts and more complicated feelings came to man that the . . . arts to which they gave rise could make man what he ideally should be, and what in many cases he is now. Well, this Gentleman, with an overdose of his primitive obsession, was able to gather together a great amount of property in the course of years.<sup>43</sup>

Knister suggests that, if Wilhelm Meister veers away from "materialistic" concerns, Bunin's story demonstrates the "primitive" nature of an "obsession" with materialism. Richard, who early in White Narcissus rejects materialism, likely rejects these works because he already knows what it is that they have to tell him.

Knister describes Richard's response to The Scarlet Letter:

But he could not sleep. Phrases and images from The Scarlet Letter floated in his mind. He was expiating Dimmesdale's secret sin yet, after two centuries. Love could not be free yet for men and women who had taken civilization as an armour which had changed to fetters upon them. What was his whole peculiar story but that of Dimmesdale--prophetic name--a delusion no longer a delusion of sin, but of impotence and analysis which belied action and love? It was the conflict of the conscious ones of his whole generation, this confusion of outer freedom and inner doubt.  
(p. 108)

Richard considers the applicability of The Scarlet Letter to his own situation. If Dimmesdale cheats himself of love by a "delusion of sin," then, Richard thinks, he comparably cheats himself of love by another delusion--a delusion of "impotence and analysis," a delusion that denies "action and love." Richard's being frozen in indecision, or a



state of "impotence and analysis," would account for Richard seeing himself "a veritable Hamlet" (p. 105), and seeing "a cliff of cloud the shape of the map of Denmark" (p. 114). It dawns on Richard that his vision has been too confined for, like Dimmesdale, he has allowed delusion to rob him and, like Hamlet, he has prolonged introspection and analysis. Richard, being an author, presumably knows that Hamlet and Dimmesdale have visions that cost them their lives. The comparisons he makes suggest to Richard that his vision needs broadening.

What might be an oblique reference to Henry James's 1903 novel, The Ambassadors, clarifies Richard's approach to the question of vision. A major character in The Ambassadors, Chad Newsome, is a young American who visits Europe but lacks the insight to benefit very much from his European experience. Chad is last seen as he expresses his intention to return to America, where he will pursue his interest in "the art of advertisement." Chad asserts, "It's an art like any other, and infinite like all the arts." He concludes, "'With the right man to work it c'est un monde.'"<sup>44</sup> Richard is a "poetical novelist" and a writer "of mail-order advertising matter" (p. 78). If Knister evokes The Ambassadors by making Richard a writer of advertisements, the function of this allusion parallels the function of reference to The Scarlet Letter. Richard can see the importance of a vision of multiplicity, as these works explore reality from the position of such a vision, but Richard has difficulty in translating such a vision into action; he may think with Hawthorne

and James, but he runs the risk of acting as Chad and Dimmesdale do, and both of these characters have little insight beyond what convention dictates to them.

Knister remarks, in a letter of 29 January 1929,

I treated . . . aberrant characters in White Narcissus . . . . A girl who would not leave her mother because the latter had not spoken to her father for years. The mother obsessed with (symbolically) white narcissus bulbs. But the story is more that of the oft-returning suitor.<sup>45</sup>

Knister suggests that Richard's role is central, and textual evidence implies that his role is central because his vision, which increasingly becomes associated with the breadth of vision nineteenth-century American romance celebrates, comes to balance the narcissistic vision collectively held by the negative characters in White Narcissus.

In White Narcissus, as in The Scarlet Letter, characters appear who either acknowledge or deny the multiplicity of experience. There are several resemblances between White Narcissus and The Scarlet Letter, resemblances of both theme and technique. These resemblances point to the ultimate importance, in both novels, of a vision broad enough to admit the complexity of reality.

Each work explicitly draws attention to itself as a fiction. The Scarlet Letter has a long preface, "The Custom-House," in which the writer addresses the reader directly, and in White Narcissus the viewpoint of the narrative is generally that of the novelist, Richard

Milne. Both writers work at something other than the writing of fiction; the writer in The Scarlet Letter has worked as a "Custom-House officer,"<sup>46</sup> while Richard works at an "advertising agency" (p. 29). Both writers present themselves as being rooted in a reality of place in similar terms. The writer in "The Custom-House" mentions "the deep and aged roots which my family has struck into the soil" (p. 8), but notes that "frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock" (p. 9), while Richard notes that "he could never be freed from the hold of this soil" except by "a forfeit of love which . . . he had come to redeem or tear from its roots forever" (p. 21).

In "The Custom-House," the preface to a work subtitled "A Romance," the writer admits that the "page of life . . . before me seemed dull and commonplace, only because I had not fathomed its deeper import" (p. 37). Richard sees the "commonplace of romance" as "quartz-glitter in the dust" (p. 54). Both works point to the extraordinary nature of ordinary life.

Were Richard obsessively to pursue his habit of seeing in the landscape reflections of his own feelings, he would presumably, like Hawthorne's Chillingworth, look

like a man chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind. (p. 61)

Interestingly enough, Chillingworth tells Hester, "I know not Lethe" (p. 72).

Both works insist on the importance of a vision broad enough to include the apparently inexplicable. In The Scarlet Letter, Mistress Hibbins, from the height of the "lattice of a chamber-window," seems to "cast a shadow" in asking, with no preliminaries,

"Wilt thou go with us tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I wellnigh promised the Black-Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one." (p. 117)

In White Narcissus, ~~Pettle~~ Mary Burnstile, inexplicably on a bough of a tree in the Burnstile orchard "seven feet of smooth-trunk" from the ground, laughingly calls to Richard, without explanatory preliminaries,

"If Ada Lethen had apples on her trees and the robins and the crows pecked them off, I'd be glad! If they fell on the ground Aw'd be glad! Aw'd be glad!" (p. 103)

The titles of the two works function in similar ways. Both titles reflect a sense of the rich multiplicity of possibility. The "scarlet letter" is, in material terms, a red letter "A" Hester is made to wear on her dress, but a number of suggestions as to what its symbolic meaning might be appear in the course of the story. Hester is to wear the letter to signify that she has committed adultery, so initially the scarlet letter stands for "adultery" or "adulteress." When Dimmesdale sees a red letter "A" appear in the sky, he gives it the "shape" of his "guilty imagination," although "another's guilt--

might have seen another symbol in it" (p. 155). Presumably the scarlet letter that Arthur Dimmesdale sees stands for his first name, his crime, or both. But the Puritans who see a "great red letter in the sky--the letter A,--" interpret it to "stand for Angel" (p. 158). Eventually, Hester's helpfulness causes "many people" to interpret her scarlet letter as standing for "Able" (p. 161). However, both halves of Hawthorne's title encompass different possible meanings; the colour "scarlet" could represent passion or violence.

The title White Narcissus also represents a range of meaning. If there is emphasis on the "narcissus" of the title, the sinister aspects of the novel receive emphasis: the obsessive and self-involved behaviour of Mrs. Lethen and Carson Hymerson, and the consequences of such behaviour. The "white" of the title has very different connotations. In the context of nineteenth-century American romance, Moby-Dick looms large. The narcissism of obsession is important in Moby-Dick; Ahab has an "intense bigotry of purpose" (p. 141). Melville explains, of his white whale, that,

in essence whiteness is not so much a colour  
as the visible absence of colour, and at the  
same time the concrete of all colours . . . . (p. 169)

After a considerable, if not quite cosmic, catalogue of all the things that white might represent, Melville concludes, "of all these things, the Albino whale was the symbol" (p. 170). Thus Melville, in a work Knister was aware of, uses the colour white as a symbol of many things,

if not multiplicity itself. The first word of Knister's title may refer to the kind of encompassing vision Richard favours, while the second half of Knister's title is a reminder of the narrow, narcissistic vision that the negative characters ~~in~~ White Narcissus share. Finally, the title White Narcissus reflects the central tension of Knister's novel.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Knister, White Narcissus, introd. Philip Child, New Canadian Library No. 32 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 135. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Knister, White Narcissus (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> "White Narcissus," TS, Box 4, File 1. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Letter received from Dr. K.E. Garay, McMaster University Library, 4 December 1984.

<sup>5</sup> "White Narcissus," MS, Box 11, File 5. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario. Subsequent references to this fragment will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Letter received from Dr. K.E. Garay, McMaster University Library, 4 December 1984.

<sup>7</sup> "White Narcissus," TS of 177 leaves, Files 46-50, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Letter received from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, 12 December 1984.

<sup>9</sup> "White Narcissus," MS of 265 leaves, Files 51-56, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Letter received from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, 12 December 1984.

<sup>11</sup> "White Narcissus," TS. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text.

- 12 Letter received from Marion Helen Cobb, Queen's University Archives, 26 February 1985.
- 13 "White Narcissus," TS, Box 11, File 6: The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario.
- 14 Letter received from Dr. K.E. Garay, McMaster University Library, 4 December 1984.
- 15 Letter from Raymond Knister to Norah C. James of Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 11 December 1928. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. This letter appears to be a reply to a request for information, for publicity purposes, about the author of White Narcissus. Knister's letter gives the dates of composition for White Narcissus as being from the autumn of 1925 to the summer of 1927.
- 16 Jay Macpherson, The Spirit of Solitude: Conventions and Continuities in Late Romance (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), p. 75. Further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 17 Raymond Knister, "Two Poems," The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West, 11, No. 8 (April 1925), 168-169.
- 18 Raymond Knister, "Elaine," This Quarter, 1, No. 1 (1925), 160-166.
- 19 Raymond Knister, "The Fate of Mrs. Lucier," This Quarter, 1, No. 2 (1925), 172-181.
- 20 Raymond Knister, "A Row of Horse Stalls," This Quarter, 1, No. 2 (1925), 30-41.
- 21 Edward J. O'Brien, ed., The Best Short Stories of 1924 (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1924), pp. 269-282.
- 22 Raymond Knister, "The Strawstack," The Canadian Forum, October 1923, pp. 18-22.
- 23 Raymond Knister, "Canadian Literati," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 166. Further references to this essay will appear in the text.
- 24 Raymond Knister's reading list, from 1914 to 1924, courteously provided by Imogen Knister Givens. Knister Family Papers.
- 25 Thomas Murtha, Letter to Raymond Knister, 31 July 1929; The Raymond Knister Papers; Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.



26 Henry James, in Preface to The American, in The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James, introd. Richard P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1962), pp. 31-32.

27 Raymond Knister, TS; untitled 33 page short story, p. 6. Imogen Knister Givens has kindly permitted the quotation of this passage. Knister Family Papers.

28 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, Norton Critical Edition, eds. Harrison Hayford and Herschel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 14. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

29 Cyril Connolly, "New Novels," rev. of eleven novels including White Narcissus, by Raymond Knister, The New Statesman, 23 February 1929, p. 637.

30 Rev. of White Narcissus, by Raymond Knister, Times Literary Supplement, 28 February 1929, p. 164.

31 J.D. Robins, "Essentials and Accidentals," The Canadian Forum, 9, No. 107 (August, 1929), 390. Subsequent references to this review will appear in the text.

32 "A Canadian Novel," rev. of White Narcissus, by Raymond Knister, The New York Times Book Review, 25 August 1929, 9.

33 Rev. of White Narcissus, by Raymond Knister, The Bookman (New York), Vol. LXX, No. 2 (October, 1929), xxx-xxx1.

34 Rev. of White Narcissus, by Raymond Knister, New York Herald Tribune, 20 October 1929, Section XII, p. 21.

35 Rev. of White Narcissus, by Raymond Knister, Boston Boston Evening Transcript, 2 November 1929, 6.

36 Desmond Pacey, "Fiction 1920-1940," in Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 685.

37 Philip Child, Introd.; White Narcissus by Raymond Knister, New Canadian Library No. 32 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 7. All further references to this work appear in the text.

38 Glenn Clever, "Point of View in White Narcissus," Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No. 1 (Winter 1978), 119. Further references to this work appear in the text.

39 Paul Denham, "Beyond Realism" Raymond Knister's White Narcissus," Studies in Canadian Literature, 3, No. 1 (Winter 1978), 75-76. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

40 Basil Cottle, The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 217.

41 Raymond Knister, "The One Thing," 57 page TS. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

42 Raymond Knister, "The Lost Gentleman," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 150.

43 Raymond Knister, "Bunin Does Story That is Regarded by Critics as One of Greatest of Age," rev. of The Gentleman From San Francisco and Other Stories, by Ivan A. Bunin; The Border Cities Star, 14 July 1923, p. 9, col. 3.

44 Henry James, The Ambassadors, ed. and introd. Leon Edel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 359.

45 Raymond Knister, letter to Dr. J.C. Guthrie, 29 January 1929. Courtesy of Imogen Knister Givens.

46 Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, vol. I, eds. William Charvat et al. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1962), p. 26. Subsequent references to The Scarlet Letter will appear in the text.

## Chapter V "Innocent Man": "Based on the Actual"

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

Marcus Waddington cites evidence indicating that Knister wrote the novella, "Innocent Man," between 1927 and 1931.<sup>1</sup> Different unpublished versions of the work exist.

A fragmentary version of the work is among the Knister Papers at Queen's University Archives.<sup>2</sup> This version ends at page one hundred and thirty-five, but the conclusion of the work is missing, as are blocks of the text; pages six to thirty-one and thirty-three to forty are unavailable. The paper of this version has the watermark "Luxor Bond, Made in Canada."<sup>3</sup> "Raymond Knister, / 143 Dunn Avenue, Toronto, Canada" is typed on the top left corner of the first page of the typescript. The address Knister gives suggests that this version is an earlier one than the other two extant versions.

The fragmentary version opens with the epigraph, "'Good men instruct one another; and bad men are the materials they delve in.' -- Lao-tze." (The source of this epigraph is section 27 of the Tao Te Ching or The Way of Life, a Taoist work.) No epigraph appears in the other versions of "Innocent Man." Knister's epigraph, which perhaps

expresses an idea that the yin-yang symbol can be seen as representing, is appropriate to "Innocent Man" because the work presents innocence and guilt as interpenetrating, the paradox being that innocence and guilt are discrete yet continuous.<sup>4</sup>

The fragmentary version of "Innocent Man" also differs from the other versions in the treatment and ordering of material. What is available of the fragmentary version indicates that it is considerably longer than the later versions. One way Knister reduced the volume of the work was by subsequently having the prisoners in the novella questioned only once; in this version, formal questioning of prisoners occurs twice. As well, material excluded from the other versions of "Innocent Man" appears in the unpublished novella, "Cab Driver" (which is discussed in the following chapter). Passages describing a taxi driver, who shares a prison cell with Jack, the protagonist of the work, do not appear in the other versions of the novella, but appear in "Cab Driver." Knister similarly omits a certain current of symbolism from later versions of "Innocent Man," and employs a very similar element in "Cab Driver." Although the prison presented in "Innocent Man" is a form of hell, Jack's prison experience is only part of his life. However, the life the protagonist of "Cab Driver" leads is unrelievedly hellish. Knister transfers the symbolism implying the presence of a hell on earth from this early version of "Innocent Man" to "Cab Driver." Not in the later versions of "Innocent Man," but in the early version, does the taxi driver declare, of a ramshackle taxi he must drive, "You'd think

it was going to fly right to Heaven like a flaming chariot" (p. 61). In the fragmentary version of "Innocent Man," the taxi driver feels that he leads "A hell of a life" (p. 119), which describes with precision the life of the protagonist of "Cab Driver."

The fragmentary version of "Innocent Man" emphasizes the role of Red, another fellow prisoner of Jack's. Knister has the two meet when Jack finds himself "in a different cell" (p. 43), after questioning; Knister would subsequently make this meeting happen very early in the course of Jack's imprisonment. Knister later assimilated the pairing of Jack and Red more smoothly into the fabric of the work.

Another version of "Innocent Man" is among The Raymond Knister Papers at McMaster University Library.<sup>5</sup> This version, which is ninety-nine pages long, is typed on white typing paper having a "Progress Bond watermark."<sup>6</sup> Like the other typescripts of "Innocent Man," this version includes infrequent and minor handwritten revisions. The title page has "32,000 words" typed on the upper left corner, and "Raymond Knister, / Ste. Anne de Bellevue, / Quebec" on the upper right corner. Beneath the title, a typed note refers to Knister as the editor of the 1928 Canadian Short Stories and author of the 1929 White Narcissus. On the last page of this version is the typed note, "Raymond Knister, / 4390 Decarie Boulevard, / Montreal, Quebec."

Another version of "Innocent Man" is part of The Knister Collection at Victoria University Library, in Toronto.<sup>7</sup> This version has paper with the watermark, "Luxor Bond."<sup>8</sup> The last page of the typescript, which is a carbon copy of the version at McMaster, is

numbered one hundred, in type, but the penultimate page, numbered ninety-nine in type, has been changed to ninety-eight, by handwritten revision. This confusion may have arisen because Knister made a small but significant change in the text, on the last page of the novella.

The penultimate paragraph of the McMaster and Victoria versions reads differently. This passage describes Jack's departure from jail and, as the guard, Little Ambrose, releases him, Jack sees his wife and a friendly police detective; in the Victoria version, the passage reads:

It was high morning and birds were singing . . . sun was shining . . . The gray-haired dick and Grace were in the corridor, both smiling. Little Ambrose unlocked the gate. He had to stay there. (p. 100)

In the McMaster version, the last sentence of the paragraph reads, "He had to stay there in his own hell" (p. 99). This addition, like the typed addresses that appear in the typescript, suggests that the McMaster version of "Innocent Man" may be the last version that Knister worked on. (The addition in the McMaster version also accords with Knister's transfer of symbolism suggesting a hell on earth from the early version of "Innocent Man" to "Cab Driver." Knister's addition to the McMaster version of "Innocent Man" implies that Jack is leaving a form of hell; in "Cab Driver," the protagonist finds that his life is an inescapable hell.)

The Victoria version of "Innocent Man" was published in the 1976 anthology of Knister's prose edited by Peter Stevens, The First Day of

2. The Action

"Innocent Man" consists of three sections. In the first section, the protagonist, Jack Dolson, marries Grace; they wed in Metropole, Michigan, and leave for a honeymoon trip, but Jack's sudden arrest occurs just after they arrive in Chicago. The second section, which is longer than the other two sections combined, deals briefly with Jack's arrest and describes in detail the events and environment of his imprisonment. The final section further describes Jack's imprisonment, and concludes with a brief account of Jack's release and reunion with Grace.

3. Influences and Sources

"Innocent Man" appears to be unique among Knister's works of longer prose fiction, in that evidence points to the novella being, to some extent, a reaction of Knister's to the views of another writer. Various sources suggest that Knister, in writing "Innocent Man," was demonstrating his belief in the power of literature based on experience, and challenging the literary opinions he perceived Morley Callaghan to hold.

In a letter of 12 January 1928 Knister describes his novella:

men are cooped in one cell of a Chicago jail for one night. They come from various classes of society, and in not too obvious a way that cell is a world. These men talk, the stories of their lives come out; if a lyrical and moving effect results, it is based on the actual. But the point is that they are all innocent; and . . . after all, in spite of their rascality, weakness and depravity, they really are innocent. The idea is in the title, INNOCENT MAN.<sup>10</sup>

Knister maintains that, in "Innocent Man," "if a lyrical and moving effect results, it is based on the actual." In contrast, Knister points out, in the essay "Canadian Literature," that the weakness of Morley Callaghan's 1928 novel, Strange Fugitive, is that it denies experienced-reality:

Canadian life, Callaghan held, was more like American life than anything else, and his first novel, Strange Fugitive, dealt with a typically American figure, a bootlegger. He was delighted to find in the files of newspapers record of the fact that there really had been in Toronto as many bootleg killings as there were in his novel. But few Toronto people would admit that he gave a faithful picture of life in the city. He seems to have suffered a nostalgia for Pittsburgh and Chicago, which he had scarcely seen . . . . Nevertheless he wrote in terms of his own experience, and a pivotal scene of his novel where rival bootleg kings come to conference to decide whether it shall be peace or war, shows these underworld big guns talking precisely like the boys on a street corner discussing a game of pool.<sup>11</sup>

Knister argues that Callaghan's gangsters sound "precisely like boys on a street corner" because Callaghan "wrote in terms of his own experience," the point being that the writer who tries to deny



experienced reality weakens his own work. In a letter of 4 October, 1929, to Thomas Murtha, Knister notes, "The underworld of Innocent Man was observed by the author more nearly first-hand, I bet, than that of Strange Fugitive."<sup>12</sup> Knister implies that a strength of "Innocent Man" is its reflection of experienced-reality. Biographical fact supplies ground for Knister's assertion. After working at The Midland, from the spring of 1924 until his return to Canada in the autumn, Knister lived in Chicago. While in Chicago, Knister worked as a taxi driver. As Imogen Knister Givens points out, during this time, "When his taxi was commandeered by some criminals, he was temporarily thrown in jail along with them."<sup>13</sup> "Innocent Man" describes a taxi driver who is in jail for similar reasons, although this episode takes up relatively little volume in the work. Nevertheless, such an inclusion supports Knister's assertion that the genesis of "Innocent Man" lies in "observed" reality, as he comments in his letter to Murtha.

Knister expressed his objection to Callaghan's depiction of Toronto's criminal underworld, not only in the essay "Canadian Literati," but also in a letter to his parents of 30 July 1929:

I was reading the climax of Morley Callaghan's Strange Fugitive [sic] the other day, where the bootleg kings of Toronto were holding a conference, trying to decide whether they were to have a truce, or make it war to the death. They talk like the teen age boys on any corner disputing who won that game of pool. The only trouble with Morley's underworld is that he never saw it.<sup>14</sup>

Knister insists that Callaghan's fiction reflects a reality with which

he is unfamiliar. Both Callaghan and Knister took seriously the issue of whether or not fiction should reflect experienced reality. Eventually, the two writers came to loggerheads in print.

In Knister's introduction to the 1928 anthology that he edited, Canadian Short Stories, he comments that little Canadian work has been done in drama or the novel because these, like their "writers, must be rooted in the soil. Shakespeare might write of Rome or Denmark, but his imagination was England, and the people responded."<sup>15</sup> Callaghan took exception to Knister's view of Canadian writing. In a letter of 15 August 1928, Callaghan tells Knister,

Today I got a copy of the Canadian Stories [sic]. I read the Introduction . . . . What is the matter with you? . . . . I am sore. You really know better. Then why do it? Are you thinking of retiring definitely? Why do you do it? Since you know better and are willing to put your name on the book. Or is it the mellowing effect of the soil?<sup>16</sup>

The letter's closing question reflects Callaghan's disagreement with Knister's view of Canadian literature, and Callaghan expresses the same sentiment, in similar terms, in a story published in 1929.

Callaghan's 1929 A Native Argosy consists of fourteen short stories and two novellas.<sup>17</sup> In the fourteenth short story of the book, "Settling Down," a young man called Burg or Burgess, who initially desires to be a writer, after being fired from his job as a reporter finds his ~~niche~~ niche in selling magazines. When Burgess first applies for a job selling magazines,

The red-headed sales manager took off his glasses and told Burg how his magazine was developing a national literature. All the women in the province ought to have the magazine in their homes, he said. Burg got the point and talked to him about books and his ambition to write stuff that would come right out of the soil. (p. 156)

The possibility exists that Callaghan's ironic description of Burg's ambition is a veiled attack on the view Knister expresses in his 1928 introduction to Canadian Short Stories. This possibility becomes more likely when Callaghan has Burgess become "convinced that people along rural routes weren't interested in developing a national literature" (p. 157). Knister writes of a literature "rooted in the soil," whereas Callaghan refers to the "mellowing effect of the soil" and "stuff that would come right out of the soil." Callaghan implies that the writer of fiction should seek out topics of interest, wherever they may be found, while Knister suggests that fiction should discover what is of inherent interest in a given time and place.

The basic point of contention between Callaghan and Knister is the validity of the aim of a literature "rooted in the soil." Callaghan's work, unlike Knister's, can be relatively unanchored in time and place. The body of Knister's work suggests that he repeatedly wrote of rural life at least partly because the idea of literature arising from the ground of material (and often everyday) reality fascinated him. As Knister bluntly explains, in a 1930 article, he rejects the notion of

people who say that a field of daffodils

is as real as a garbage can, but who won't admit that daffodils grow in anything so material as earth and manure.<sup>18</sup>

For Knister, recognition of the continuity between tangible realities and intangible realities is vital, as the very title White Narcissus suggests, for, in nature, no purely white narcissus exists. Callaghan, who had written a novel dealing with crime, did not sympathize with Knister's view of the relationship between external, material reality and fiction; Knister gave a practitioner's response to a theoretical question in writing a novella of prison life after the experience of being a prisoner himself. In "Innocent Man," Knister wrote a novella, of which he hoped, "if a . . . moving effect results, it is based on the actual."

4. Context

Although "Innocent Man" reflects Knister's experience of the summer of 1924, when he lived in Chicago and was imprisoned while working as a cab driver, the circumstances of his life were quite different by the time he wrote the novella. The newly-married Knister was spending the summer at Hanlan's Point, Toronto Island, at the time he began writing "Innocent Man" in 1927 (Waddington, p. 258); Knister next lived in Toronto, until moving to a "farm house near Port Dover," on Lake Erie, in the spring of 1929. In the following spring, the Knisters moved into Port Dover, where a daughter, Imogen, was born

in June. From the summer of 1931 until the following summer, Knister and his family lived in Quebec, first in Montreal and then in Ste. Anne de Bellevue.<sup>19</sup>

Over the time Knister wrote "Innocent Man," he maintained his interest in regional literature. Shortly before beginning the novella, Knister reviewed Ruth Suckow's Iowa Interiors (1926), a collection of short stories. In his review of 4 December 1926, "The Interior of America," Knister comments that Suckow's stories "show her . . . concerned with the actual, the quotidian, with what can be identified, named, understood--but also felt."<sup>20</sup> Knister claims that, in her fiction, Suckow balances attention to the materially or visibly "actual" with attention to the "felt," and the same claim can be made of "Innocent Man."

While working on "Innocent Man," for most of which Chicago is the setting, Knister expressed his respect for the work of Carl Sandburg. In "The Poetic Muse in Canada," an essay published on 6 October 1928, Knister writes:

Carl Sandburg finds beauty and majesty in Chicago. . . . His very name, I feel sure, arouses a shudder among my readers. That is why we have no Burns, no Sandburg; the fallacy that only certain traditionally sanctified objects are poetical would make progress impossible. Nothing, not poetry or dreams, can exist except on the basis of reality.<sup>21</sup>

At the time of writing "Innocent Man," Knister celebrated the idea of basing literature on experience, and having a base in external or

material reality for the exploration of such less communicable realities as character.

## 5. Critical Reception

No study of "Innocent Man" currently exists.

## II. "Innocent Man"

Textual evidence suggests that, in "Innocent Man," the movement from a personal, rural environment to an impersonal, urban environment, and the significant use of images of sound and sight, trace the protagonist's growing consciousness of others and the value of everyday life. Knister makes use of a transition from one world to another--the protagonist leaves everyday reality to enter a world of nightmare and there discover the inherent beauty of so-called ordinary experience.

"Innocent Man" opens,

Jack Dolson was driving toward Chicago with the girl who had just become his wife. They felt transformed, yet never more themselves. It was like passing into another country; they had just stepped over the border. (p. 223)

In the first passage of the work there are three references to change: border-crossing, transformation, and "passing into another country." Emphasis on the subject of change opens the novella. And before

giving further attention to the Dolsons' drive "toward Chicago," Knister delineates Jack's character. Jack is casual about the details of daily life, and so his wedding has been delayed; "Jack wasn't very good at saving, and for a time neither would name the day." Presumably his casual attitude continues; "Jack lost his job, and the insecurity decided him," and he does not delay his wedding again (p. 224). Jack's plans for the near future are to "spend the summer jaunting around," and by the autumn, to "get some job in the city." His primary concern is that he might have to sell his car:

Probably he wouldn't have to sell the car.

There had been a little difficulty about this automobile. He wanted one, whether he were getting married or not. But he could not buy a new one outright. He had to keep enough in reserve for the other expenses. And the local agent seemed to be queer. He wanted a larger amount paid down than Jack thought customary.

'Don't you know me?' Jack demanded.

'Did you ever know me to get fired from a job in this town?'

'I don't know, you change pretty often.'

'That don't make any difference, I never got fired. I've lived here all my life, ain't I?'

'Sure you have.'

'Well, then--'

The dealer shook his head. Jack went to the city, and got the model of car he wanted. Of course the monthly payment was quite large. A week afterward he was laid off his job. Three weeks after that was the wedding day. There was no need of telling the dealers in the city these particulars or that he was taking a trip. What difference did it make to them, so long as he made the payments? (p. 224)

Details cumulatively indicate Jack's carelessness, but his decision to

ignore a due car payment later proves to be crucially costly, as it will cause his arrest.

Because the work begins with an emphasis on change, the details that characterize Jack early in the novella acquire the significance of indicating what it is that Jack changes from. Before describing Jack's arrest in Chicago, Knister gives further clues of the extent of Jack's carelessness, and carelessness of others. On the way to Chicago,

They were slipping through the country and the villages faster than they realized, while they were silent or talked. They could not have told whether they met many other cars. Once in a while somebody passed them, without difficulty. Once they passed a truck with a man and woman in its cab enjoying conversation, while empty chicken crates occasionally dropped out at the back of the truck. Jack felt so good he sounded the horn and gestured back with his thumb.  
(p. 227)

Knister implies Jack's obliviousness to the plight of others. Only because Jack feels "so good" does he indicate to a couple that the freight in their truck is tumbling onto the highway. Others make little impact on the Jack of the opening of the novella.

Jack has a fondness for getting his own way; "The country was just a background obligingly picturesque and familiar" (p. 227). Grace comments that perhaps they should not travel "too far today. We're tired, and this is supposed to be a holiday" (p.229). But Jack gently insists that they proceed directly to Chicago:

The afternoon had not begun to close down



before they had signs of the approaching city. Garages and gas-stations, became more frequent, and bill-boards, and lunch counters, soft drink stands and barbecues never ceased. Traffic meeting them became thicker.

They passed Gary, in smoke and a trembling sky of daylight flame. The traffic was heavier and even more and faster. There was no other sign of the smoke or the skyscrapers of Chicago. They were driving in a procession entering the great city over the flat plain. On every road there was such a procession, and the city would receive them all, and never know the difference. (p. 224)

The Dolsons approach to Chicago involves seeing an inferno-like place hove into view. They proceed by "entering the great city over the flat plain," and the Bible associates the "cities of the plain" with Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. xiii. 10-12). Approaching Chicago means nearing "the black grime of the city." Grace declares the place "beautiful," but she has never seen Chicago before (p. 229). And just after her declaration, a policeman stops Jack for making an illegal left-hand turn. During this brief episode, the policeman asks Jack, who has not noticed any signs forbidding left-hand turns, "'Can't you read? CAN'T YOU READ?'" (pp. 229-30). The repeated question raises the subject of sensory perception. While the question refers to visual perception, auditory images become at least as important as visual images in the course of the story. Jack and Grace learn of the presence of the policeman who stops them when "The rattling crack of a motorcycle" slows "to a rapid asthma beside them." In Chicago, cars move "shrilly" and "stop with squeals and hissings and muffled throbs" in response to "red lights" (p. 229). The shift

from visual to auditory imagery occurs in the first section of "Innocent Man":

Down the avenue shot the automobiles, four and five abreast on either side of the street, passing one another, jockeying for positions inside or outside, charging across side streets before the lights changed from green to white to red--drawing together in a herd when the lights went red, then off again in a race, slow cars left behind in fifty feet, others howling shrilly in second gear for half a block, then shooting ahead in high, charging forward. (pp. 230-1)

Knister's image of the city that the Dolsons encounter concentrates in succession on colour, motion, and sound.

The central use of images of sound, and the use of different settings, may be explained by a comment of Knister's. In a letter of 28 August 1929 to Thomas Murtha, Knister writes, of "Innocent Man,"

the start . . . doubtless does not give off the note of the main part. However my idea was to start from a credible and even mundane world so as to heighten as well as make credible what was to follow.<sup>22</sup>

Textual evidence suggests that, as Jack moves from a personal, rural environment to an impersonal, urban environment, he develops an increased regard for other human beings. Knister's letter refers to a shift in "Innocent Man" from a "credible" and relatively "mundane world" to another order of reality, that serves to "heighten" the latter. Jack's prison environment involves "a heightening that was a denial of life" (p. 281). "Innocent Man" shares with other of

Knister's works of longer prose fiction the celebration of the ordinary or "commonplace" (p. 237) world. Knister's use of the prison environment, like his drawing on the Narcissus myth in White Narcissus, finally comments on the nature of ordinary reality. In both works, "heightened" images of experienced reality evoke the extraordinary nature of the ordinary.

The initial setting of "Innocent Man" is personal and rural. Jack and Grace have a "quiet" wedding at Grace's home and, after a "nifty feed" of a "luncheon," leave to find several friends of Jack "standing at the curb, grinning" (pp. 225-6). Once the Dolsons reach Chicago,

To Grace there was something terrible in the impersonal rush of the tide of cars, with people within reaching distance of her on either side, before and behind, the faces white, savage, swarthy, indifferent. (p. 231)

Whereas Grace immediately perceives the qualitative differences between Chicago and her hometown of Metropole, Michigan (p. 232), Jack does not. (Grace's perception of the cars of the city is similar to the perception of cars presented in Knister's poem, "The Motor," where drivers and their cars appear as "Sharks . . . bearing down upon . . . prey.")<sup>23</sup> Jack's imprisonment makes him increasingly aware of his immediate physical and social environment. Through the treatment of sound, Knister evokes the qualitative nature of the prison environment.

Knister unobtrusively associates the rural environment, of the

opening part of the novella, with pleasing sound levels. As the Dolsons drive toward Chicago, "They were slipping through the country and the villages faster than they realized, while they were silent or talked" (p. 227). In Chicago, Jack leaves Grace at a restaurant to order their meals, while he parks the car. As Jack drives alone, his sudden arrest occurs for "'elopin' with somebody else's car'" (p. 234). Once in jail, sound levels are no longer either pleasing or unregulated.

In the second section of "Innocent Man," Jack's introduction to the world of prison is an introduction to a world of imposed silence. He initially makes immediate and vocal objection to being accused of car theft:

'All right, call the people I bought it from if you want to. Call them right here and get it straight. I paid for it--'  
'Keep quiet,' . . . . 'They gave us the tip on how you paid.'  
Jack was silent. (p. 234)

Jack repeatedly tries to get permission to call his wife, but cannot obtain permission (pp. 235-7). The refusal to allow Jack to use the telephone again illustrates the degree to which noise levels and regulated silence define the world of Knister's prison. Despite "silence in the cell," the prison "air" is so noisy with "jokes, "shouts, curses and laughter" that periodically a guard appears to "bellow" in objection. As new prisoners mill "about the pen," before being "put . . . into the cells," other prisoners emerge "from the backs of cells to look out and look on and say a word on the quiet" (p. 241). To be beyond the confines of the jail is to have vocal

freedom. A prisoner remarks, "My girl is a warbler in a drum--a cabaret!" (p. 290). In contrast, "All" is "silent" in Jack's cell (p. 281), and there is "Silence in the [adjacent] cell" (p. 279).

In this twilight world of regulated sound, Jack begins to distinguish the qualitative differences between his rural home and the city. In jail, he comes to see Chicago as a "hideous city, . . . raucously and indifferently intimidating" (pp. 236-7). Imprisoned, Jack thinks of himself in mechanical terms, as if he were a car; "It was as though he had died; no, . . . the ignition was turned off, he had been thrown out of gear" (p. 236). Jack's alienation may reflect his horror at the impersonality of the prison environment; despite the presence of "so many different kinds of fellows," "though it was all right to ask what they were in for, personal remarks were few" (p. 242).

Jack's imprisonment causes him to see the difference between Metropole and the metropolis of Chicago. He hears the "uproar of the city" (p. 233) as the police drive him to prison. Jack learns to look back upon his rural home with longing; in jail he finds the atmosphere, of

the dull exhalation of a cloudy day, a dreary hazy day of imminent autumn storm. He thought of the June night outside, away from this, the now-dewy country through which he had driven. (p. 236)

Jack comes to compare the dreary prison atmosphere with the countryside he had cheerfully left in a hurry, in his haste to reach Chicago.

While driving to Chicago, he and Grace had spoken or not, as they wished. In jail Jack associates "the commonplace world" and "his own words" (p. 237). The conditions of prison encourage Jack to comprehend the value of "the commonplace world."

Jack's revaluation of ordinary life rests on his experience in prison. The prison world of "uproarious silent desires" (p. 267) heightens the pleasures of ordinary life, including one temporarily available even in jail--music; prisoners begin to sing,

'What'll I do--when you--  
Are far--away--  
And I--am blue--  
What'll I dooooo?'

Curly began to hum. Protests came from somewhere: 'Shut up.'

'Hold the rumps.'  
'Cut the serenade [sic].'

Red began to hum and then to boom. Pretty soon everybody in the cell was singing and squeaking.

When I'm--alone--  
With dreams--of you--  
That won't--come true--  
What'll I do--what'll I do . . . .  
Who'll I te-ell my troubles to-oo?

The voices rose with the pathos of all singing, human voices reaching out to the infinite of beauty never to be expressed in any other form, it might be, in all their various and shifting lives. The songs went on, filling the jail, new ones starting before a fellow could get self-conscious. (pp. 256-7)

The "commonplace" pleasure of music cannot last in Knister's jail; the jail heightens the commonplace by extinguishing it, and creating a felt void. The prison world consists of "a heightening that was a

denial of life" (p. 281). If music provides temporary pleasure, this period quickly passes; singing gives way to an exchange of insults, and subsequently violence, between black and white prisoners.

During Jack's imprisonment, his obliviousness to others decreases. In jail, he wonders of Whitey, another prisoner, "What was behind those shallow gray-slate, rainpool eyes?" (p. 240). Ultimately, Jack's new awareness of others becomes defined in his views on the subject of innocence.

Although the prison environment discourages verbal expression, in the long second section of "Innocent Man," prisoners recount the circumstances of their arrest. Prisoners explain their innocence. An imprisoned taxi driver explains that he merely made the mistake of innocently accepting a passenger who was carrying stolen goods: "The other fellow had the stuff, and I happened to be driving him." The taxi driver adds that his passenger had an "Armful of ladies' dresses and coats. I never knew he had them" (p. 244). A prisoner called Bert describes his arrest as "an accident"; he had been at a party, and after somebody rather drunk accused the host of robbery, the police arrived and arrested Bert as he was "trying to keep . . . apart" (p. 248) the accuser and the accused.

When the prisoners who share a cell with Jack have an opportunity to speak, they speak of their innocence; they claim to have been arrested on the basis of a mistake, or an accident. Jonathan Ayers, a drug addict usually referred to by the nickname Snowbird, when asked "What you here for, this time?" replies "They arrested me."

When pressed, Snowbird answers "'Shoplifting. But I ain't guilty'" (p. 270).

As prisoners repeatedly refer to their own innocence, Jack develops an interest in the subject of innocence. In the "dust-filled air of early morning," Jack momentarily thinks that, as men differ only in their clothing or circumstances, there is "no hope for anyone" (p. 278). But, as the night passes, Jack finds hope, instead of gloom, in the universality of the human condition. In the prevailing "silence" Jack sees the prisoners as

innocent, being men. What did men do on this planet but what lay nearest their hands, what did they try for but what their spirits and bodies hungered for? What else, being men?

Jack perceives a universal "innocence":

Yes, they were innocent, these men, even as they had told with their lies. The comradeship, the encouragement, the little gifts they gave one another--their best. The way they strove to some ideal, the best their senses would let them recognize. The effort to win the approval of the people they had learned to admire. Weren't they all good children? Weren't they, these children, these ruffians, these men, all innocent? (p. 297)

Immediately after these thoughts occur to Jack, he is released from prison. Jack's freedom follows his recognition that men do "the best their senses would let them recognize." In images that appeal to the senses of sight, and especially sound, Knister evokes Jack's developing perception of external reality, and in particular his degree of awareness of others.



In the course of "Innocent Man," there is a pairing of Jack with the prisoner Red. Red, who is "red-headed" (p. 286), first appears in the second section of the novella, after Jack is in prison. The first prisoner to speak to Jack (p. 237), Red is an admitted car thief:

'I took a rap of three years for a car I stole when I was a kid. Now I'm back for more. But when I've put in these three years, me for the straight and narrow path, and I don't mean maybe. You won't catch me riding in any other man's car. I've put in time enough.' (p. 283)

If Jack is a nominal car thief, Red is an admitted car thief. The pairing of Jack with Red illustrates the extent of Jack's developing selflessness. "Innocent Man" begins by presenting Jack as more or less oblivious to others, and ends with his explicit identification with another. The novella ends as Jack, "looking back" while departing, thinks, "Poor Red. It wasn't his turn" (p. 298). If all are "innocent, being men" (p. 297), such universality implies the necessity of universal sympathy. More specifically, Jack finally arrives at the belief that men can aspire to an "ideal, the best their senses would let them recognize" (p. 297). The sights and sounds of his night in jail enable Jack to identify with another accused of car theft, even as Jack leaves the prison. His "senses" bring him to value the commonplace and to recognize the reality of others. Jack's trip from Metropole to the metropolis of Chicago is a voyage of discovery; the prisoners, when singing, are "like lost voyagers . . . on the ocean," who see "flashes and beams from hell" (p. 257).

Each of the three sections of "Innocent Man" refers to the state of Jack's heart. During the wedding ceremony, "Jack's heart went into his boots" (p. 225). In the second section, his heart sinks when he cannot initially learn the reason for his arrest (p. 233). In the final section, he speculates that, in jail, "What each man guessed of his own heart the forms of his fellows gave bodily shape" (p. 227). As "Innocent Man" traces the development of Jack's selflessness, the novella can be said to deal with the education of Jack's heart. Dickens' Great Expectations similarly deals with its protagonist's education of the heart. But in Dickens' novel, the protagonist sees his world as coloured by guilt before his education of the heart is complete. Knister's protagonist perceives a universal innocence before completing his education of the heart. The title, "Innocent Man," therefore captures the essence of Jack's education, if the extent and permanence of Jack's education remain a moot point.

However, the title "Innocent Man" may also be a double entendre. Jack uses the term "innocent" to mean the opposite of guilty. (The root meaning of "innocent" is free from the will to harm or hurt.) But Knister may also be using the term as a synonym for ignorant, or oblivious. If so, Jack's determination of universal innocence and setting of ideals according to perception by the "senses" implies that there is an "innocence" of what lies beyond the senses. Jack's growth culminates in the belief that men strive for "the best their senses would let them recognize" (p. 297). Sensory perception would then represent the means of arriving at the fullest extent of human perception, as distinguishable from cerebration, or purely abstract

thought, and there would be especial reason for Knister's making central use of evocative images of sound, and sometimes sight, in his novella. "Innocent Man" demonstrates why Knister might be drawn to fiction "based on the actual." In the world of Knister's longer prose fiction, senses enable contact with tangible realities, and the fullest perception of tangible realities leads to the recognition of impalpable or intangible realities.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 258. Subsequent references to this thesis will be included in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Knister, "Innocent Man," TS. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Letter received from Marion Cobb, Queen's University Archives, 3 December 1984.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to David White for discussion of this point.

<sup>5</sup> "Innocent Man," TS, Box 5, Folder 7. 99 pp. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Letter received from Dr. K.E. Garay, McMaster University Archives, 22 November 1984.

<sup>7</sup> "Innocent Man," TS of 100 pages, Folders 64-66, The Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario. Subsequent references to this novella will appear in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Letter received from Dr. R.C. Brandeys, Victoria University Library, 12 December 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Knister, "Innocent Man," in The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint, No. 17, ed. and introd. Peter Stevens (Toronto and Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 223-298. Subsequent references to this novella will appear in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Raymond Knister to Bobbs Merrill Publishing Company, 12 January 1928. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Knister, "Canadian Literati," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 166.

12 Raymond Knister, letter to Thomas Murtha of 4 December 1929. Courteously made available by and quoted with the permission of William Murtha.

13 Imogen Knister Givens, "Raymond Knister--Man or Myth?" Essays on Canadian Writing, No. 16 (Winter 1979-80), p. 7.

14 Letter from Raymond Knister to parents, 30 July 1929. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

15 Raymond Knister, ed. and introd., Canadian Short Stories (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928), p. xv.

16 Morley Callaghan, Letter to Raymond Knister, 15 August 1928. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

17 Morley Callaghan, A Native Argosy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929). Further references to this work will be included in the text.

18 Raymond Knister, "Dissecting the 'T.B.M.': A Reply to S. Laycock's 'Why Be True to Life' and a Ruthless Investigation of a Certain Mental Viewpoint," Saturday Night, 6 Sept. 1930, p. 5.

19 Bonita O'Halloran, "Chronological History of Raymond Knister," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), pp. 197-8.

20 Raymond Knister, "The Interior of America," rev. of Iowa Interiors, by Ruth Suckow, Saturday Night, 4 December 1926, pp. 11-12.

21 Raymond Knister, "The Poetic Muse in Canada," Saturday Night, 6 October 1928, p. 3.

22 Raymond Knister, letter to Thomas Murtha of 28 August 1929. Courteously made available by and quoted with the permission of William Murtha.

23 "The Motor," by Raymond Knister, in Windfalls for Cider: the Poems of Raymond Knister, preface by James Reaney, ed. and introd. Joy Kuropatwa, afterword by Imogen Knister Givens (Windsor, Ontario: Black Moss Press, 1983), p. 59.

## Chapter VI "Cab Driver": "The Babylon of the Chicago Night"

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

Knister's novella, "Cab Driver," became available in January, 1984.<sup>1</sup> Various letters Knister wrote to his parents indicate that he worked on "Cab Driver" between 1927 and 1930. In a letter of 31 July 1927, Knister writes, "I want to start a new book as near the first as possible," a book he describes as "a humdinger Chicago one, all taking place in one night in the underworld."<sup>2</sup> (This description could also apply to "Innocent Man," but in a letter to Knister of 6 June 1927, Thomas Murtha refers to having read "Innocent Man.")<sup>3</sup> Knister refers, in passing, to his "taxi novel" in a letter of 14 May 1928, and implies that his novel is not yet complete.<sup>4</sup> By 28 November 1928, Knister remarks that his "novel," a "taxi yarn," is a "character study" of a "youth," "Toronto raised," who "goes to Chicago."<sup>5</sup> On 1 August 1930, Knister wrote to his parents that he was "just finishing" his "short novel of Chicago," a work of "35,000 words."<sup>6</sup>

The only known extant copy of "Cab Driver" is a typescript of one hundred and eighteen pages, typed on white typing paper, which includes a few brief handwritten revisions. There are "no visible

watermarks" on the paper of this version.<sup>7</sup> "Cab Driver" comes to a grinding halt, rather than a smooth conclusion. Knister mentions, in a letter to his parents of 28 November 1928, that the work is thirty-five thousand words long; as the extant typescript consists of only one hundred and eighteen pages, roughly the last twenty pages of the novella are missing. Three pages of fragments, of another version (or versions) exist: two typewritten pages, numbered three and sixteen, bear the title "Hack Driver," while a typewritten page numbered seventeen has the title "The Hack Driver."<sup>8</sup>

These fragments represent an earlier draft (or drafts) of the work, for "Cab Driver" incorporates the occasional handwritten revisions that occur in the fragments. These fragments may represent a shorter version of the novella. The page three fragment corresponds to the material that appears from mid-page three to mid-page four of the typescript, while the fragments numbered pages sixteen and seventeen correspond to narrative occurring from pages seventeen to nineteen in "Cab Driver." While there are no radical differences between the material in the fragments and the corresponding sections of "Cab Driver," the minor changes Knister makes provide a sharper focus on the protagonist and the desolation of his environment. For example, where Knister calls his protagonist "the driver" in the fragment numbered page seventeen, at the corresponding point in "Cab Driver" the protagonist's name, Berwind, appears (p. 19). (The name Berwind occurs in the fragments numbered pages sixteen and seventeen.)

Twelve different titles occur in the typescript.<sup>9</sup> The first

title Knister uses, "The Hack Driver" (pp. 1, 3-15, 18-20), adds to the evidence that the fragments of the work represent an earlier draft or drafts. As the last third of the typescript consistently carries the title "Cab Driver" (pp. 79-118), this title will be used to refer to the novella.

"Cab Driver" is among The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. The novella, which is currently unpublished, ought to be published. "Cab Driver" is a highly readable work, and, apart from conveying the atmosphere of the Chicago of the twenties, Knister's novella demonstrates that the Canadian fiction of the twenties has vigour and power which perhaps, as yet, go unrecognized.

## 2. The Action.

"Cab Driver" presents twenty-four hours in the life of Jerry Berwind, a cab driver who works during the night. As setting, the Chicago of the nineteen-twenties plays an important role; over the course of a night, Berwind moves through the city in increasing suspicion and fear. The relative freedom and pleasure of Berwind on the following day become a mockery under the influence of his night-time experience, for he absorbs the brutality of the streets of the city. Echoes of the protagonist's pastoral, Canadian past slightly alleviate the gloom of the novella's atmosphere, without ameliorating



the hell through which Berwind moves.

### 3. Influences and Sources

The Chicago through which Berwind moves becomes a "Babylon" (p. 11), and evidence points to possible sources for the presentation of Chicago as a Babylon. Knister's 1923 review of Ivan A. Bunin's The Gentleman From San Francisco and Other Stories<sup>10</sup> establishes the edition of the work with which Knister was familiar.<sup>11</sup> The edition of Bunin's work which Knister reviewed includes a prominent reference to Babylon; the epigraph to the first and title story of the collection reads, "'Woe to thee, Babylon, that mighty city!'"--and cites the source of the quotation as "APOCALYPSE" (p. 3). Knister closes his review by noting that, in comparison to the title story, the other three stories of the collection are "less important." Knister's relative interest in the title story of Bunin's collection, which has an epigraph referring to Babylon, suggests that the epigraph to "The Gentleman From San Francisco" may be a source for the presentation of Chicago as a Babylon in "Cab Driver."

Babylon may have been a catchword for a modern metropolis to Knister, at least in the context of his friendship with Thomas Murtha. Murtha comments, in a letter to Knister of 16 March 1927,

Is Morley [Callaghan] back from New York? Or did he dare at all to join the hick-visitors to the Babylon of the land of Hope and Glory.<sup>12</sup>

If "Babylon" was not a catchword for Knister, it may have been for Murtha; and the possibility exists that Murtha's use of the word Babylon sparked the idea to make a Babylon of Chicago in "Cab Driver."

#### 4. Context

The years in which Knister wrote "Cab Driver" were a time of change in his personal life. Knister married in June, 1927, and mentions beginning work on his "new," "Chicago" book in a letter of 31 July 1927. Knister and his wife spent the summer of 1927 at a "cottage on Hanlan's Point, Toronto Island."<sup>13</sup> The couple moved to Toronto at the summer's end, staying until the spring of 1930, when, "after having spent nearly three years in Toronto, [they] moved to a small farm house on Lake Erie, a few miles east of Port Dover." In June of 1930, "a daughter, Imogen, was born" (Waddington, pp. 186-7). By 1 August 1930, Knister wrote to his parents that he was "just finishing" his "short novel of Chicago."

Knister's correspondence indicates that by late 1928 he conceived of his Chicago novel as a study in character; in a letter to his parents of 28 November 1928 Knister explains,

Shall now . . . tear into novel. Got the big idea for it I have been hunting . . . . The idea of my taxi yarn . . . is this, "A Guy Gets Hardboiled." He's a youth of ordinary upbringing, Toronto raised, goes to Chicago, everything goes against him, and he feels obliged to get tougher and tougher, until a catastrophe and then he gets straightened out again. Interesting character study?

Either the "catastrophe" Knister mentions remained only a conception of the work, or appears in the missing concluding pages of the novella, or between 1928 and 1930, the "catastrophe" evolved into the corrosive influence that Berwind's environment exerts upon him.

The extant version of "Cab Driver" is an "interesting character study," but it is a study of character in relation to environment.

In "Purposes of Fiction," an article published on 13 October 1926, or shortly before he began writing "Cab Driver," Knister acknowledges the appeal of skilled characterization in fiction:

when Conrad scrutinized human character in its various national and individual characteristics, he did so with the greatest care, . . . in the interests of truth for the creation of beauty.

Through forms of beauty to share his sense of mystery, terror, delight or ugliness with his fellow-creatures, was the aim which Conrad confessed, which he gave as the aim of the artist in all times and all mediums. To make you see, to make you feel, and to realize the solidarity of all created things under the sun.<sup>14</sup>

Knister's tone, in describing Conrad's definition of "the aim of the artist," suggests that Knister himself found Conrad's definition appealing. The emphasis Knister gives the "character" of "fellow-creatures" accords with the concentration on the figure of Berwind in "Cab Driver." However, the complexity of "the aim of the artist" Knister discusses accords with more than the characterization of Berwind being of importance in "Cab Driver."

Just before writing "Cab Driver," in an article published on 9 February 1927 called "The Wonders of Man," Knister comments,

The wildest of visions and the most exalted depend finally upon what we have seen or heard of in our actual quotidian life. But imagination has been added to it.

What is imagination . . . which enables us to summon unheard of things from the void, and give them a shape, a local habitation and a name? And even to make guesses as to the way we do it. Perhaps it is the soul, which keeps us searching, searching . . . . And if the secret is infinite and infinitely removed, so is the search and the possibility of discoveries.<sup>15</sup>

In "Cab Driver," Knister expresses a sense of "the search and the possibility of discoveries" in an exploration of the relationship between Berwind and his environment. Berwind moves through the physical city of Chicago and a Babylon of nightmarish terror: "The wildest of visions and the most exalted depend finally upon what we have seen or heard of in our actual quotidian life."

A character named Berwind appears elsewhere in Knister's fiction, in the short story "Hackman's Night." Chicago is the setting of the story, in which Knister balances attention to action and atmosphere. The protagonist, Berwind, drives a taxi during the crime-rife Chicago night. "Hackman's Night" does not represent Knister's best fiction--at the conclusion Berwind unexpectedly wins a substantial financial reward--and conceivably the story represents bread-and-butter work. Yet the atmosphere of the story lends an immediacy to the work. For example, when a mobster passenger causes Berwind's taxi to become the target of machine-gun fire, Knister evokes Berwind's terror with convincing immediacy:

There was a little delay in cutting across the bend of the boulevard for a series of cars were turning it, going north. Three huge limousines they were, glittering in the darkness. The first one had extraordinarily powerful lights, which rested on the yellow [Berwind's] cab. Berwind felt a slight jar in the midst of the motor-vibration. Without turning his head he knew that his passenger had hit the floor of the cab.

The first car with its powerful lights was past, in a flash of speed. The others slowed at once, and Berwind's cap flew from his head. A tornado, a sea blast, seemed to strike him. He was not conscious of hearing the machine guns, but he would have sworn that there were several, and that hundreds of bullets were striking his cab. In an instant's flash of feeling he was sure that some of the bullets must have struck him, though he could not yet feel the effects of any of them.<sup>16</sup>

Knister gives a sharp sense of environment in relation to character in his description of Berwind's reaction to the sudden and severe underworld attack on his cab. Waddington notes that Knister wrote "Hackman's Night" in early 1929 (pp. 186-7), which would mean that Knister was working on "Hackman's Night" while working at "Cab Driver." "Hackman's Night" includes a balancing of attention to character and environment, which is of the essence in "Cab Driver."

##### 5. Critical Reception

No study of "Cab Driver" currently exists.

## II. "Cab Driver"

Knister's novella explores one of the currents running through "Group Portrait," and especially through the novel's later version, "Soil in Smoke": "Cab Driver" follows a night in the life of a character who might, like Del or Robina, have once thought in terms of escaping to a city. The degradation of Jerry Berwind, as one of the inhabitants of the Babylon that is Chicago, is the focus of the novella. "Cab Driver" evokes the physical reality of the city of Chicago in convincing detail, while blending attention to material reality with acknowledgement of the intangible truths of character and a sense of place. "Cab Driver" is a work of six sections, and the division of the novella reflects the gradual erosion of Berwind's better impulses.

Knister emphasises the discomfort and danger of Berwind's working environment. Perhaps the worst part of his job is his place of work. The city is filthy:

The streets were grimy, with soot and night dew, a wicked combination. On many nights when there was no rain a driver was wise to put on his chains. But the cab company did not make you do that unless rain actually fell. But clean rain-washed streets were not so slippery as this sooty stuff. (p. 46)

As well as pollution, the city has the stench of slaughter; while driving, Berwind finds that "A heavy-settling odor from the stockyards a couple of miles west came to him" (p. 53).

As a physical setting, the city of Chicago is a place of dirt, noise, and stench. As a social setting, the city is even worse. In the opening scene of the story, Berwind's colleagues discuss the recommendation of a distant hotel as an effective way of cheating passengers who are unfamiliar with the city (p. 1). The behaviour of a passenger makes Berwind wonder, "What was up with the guy? Was he a killer?" (p. 13). After all, Berwind thinks, "Muscle men and con sharks, if they couldn't get the big game, they came after the poor hard-working hack-drivers" (p. 17). In cabs, the "glass behind the driver" is "reinforced with wire netting" (p. 19) because violence is a real possibility.

On "Sixty-third Street," the "doubtful second and third storey windows fronting on the L" or Elevated railway are the windows of "Speakeasies, furnished rooms, gang headquarters, whatnot" (p. 76):

And one could bet that the windows opening directly upon the railway would not be unshaded. One saw strange sights from the window of an Elevated train, but one did not see actual murder, gambling, shooting, rape. There was a residue of caution left to the openness of the underworld. Yet you never knew when you would come upon just such sights. They were not strange to the taxi-driving brethren. In fact, those same cabs were the sites of stranger doings than their drivers would care to admit. (p. 77)

It is through "the Babylon of the Chicago night" (p. 11) that Knister's protagonist moves. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Babylon" as "any . . . vicious city," and "vicious city" is a concise description of Knister's Chicago. The filth, noise, stench,

fear, suspicion and violence of Knister's Chicago make it a Babylon or form of hell; "Cab Driver" opens;

The smoke of gasoline was blinding in the station tunnel, the fumes from the exhaust choking. The purring, drumming, thumping, squeaking, grinding, the roar of eighty cabs in line turned the air into a sea filled with demons. Lights from the vault swam dimly above, and the dull cab lights winked and throbbled, splashing dusty on the black hoods, the yellow bodies. (p. 1)

The introductory image of "Cab Driver" strikes the keynote of the work, for in the course of the story Berwind becomes brutalized by the hell that the "Babylon of the Chicago night" represents.

In each of the six sections of "Cab Driver" there is mention of the weather. Early in the first section of the story, the weather is "hot" (p. 2), and Berwind notes just how "hot" (p. 20) it is. The "torrid close air of the August night" (p. 30) covers the "flat immense waste of houses and streets stretched beneath a smoke-glowing sky" (p. 45) that is Chicago in the second section of the story. In the third part of the story there is a reference to "sweltering weather" (p. 50). In the fourth part of "Cab Driver," the "tremendous and all-pervading heat of the early part of the evening had passed, and now a breeze lifted and blew refuse in the dirty street" (p. 71). By the fifth part of the story, the temperature is cooling "rapidly," and Berwind finds that "The coolness struck his arm and cheek freshly, for it seemed that they had not forgotten the sweltering earlier part of the night" (p. 88). In the final section



of the work, Berwind notices that "A kind of mist hung over the small trees and grass. It would be another sweltering hot day, in the end, of course" (p. 102). In describing extremely hot weather that retreats only briefly towards the end of the night before promising to return, Knister provides a symbolic inferno as the setting for following twenty-four hours in the life of Jerry Berwind.

In the first section of the story, Berwind picks up a passenger who asks to be taken "to the Rainbo [sic] Gardens" (p. 12), a cabaret. The passenger explains that he is seeking a girl who might be working as a cabaret dancer. Desultory chat between Berwind and his passenger ensues.

Near the beginning of the second section of "Cab Driver," Berwind thinks that the cabaret looks "insignificant enough, away from that lighted entrance with the carpet and the canopy" (p. 21). Perhaps Berwind perceives the entrance to the cabaret as being the most significant aspect of its appearance because the place is inaccessible to him. He has never been inside the cabaret; he can only speculate that "The Gardens must extend within a court behind the drab store buildings which lined the street" (p. 21). Berwind's interest in the entrance to and probable design of the Rainbo Gardens suggests that the place is an inaccessible haven--if not heaven--in his eyes. In the opening paragraph of the second section, Berwind notes that "Men loafed and passed, sinister or commonplace as the buildings, dependent as they upon the observer's mood" (p. 21).

(The comment that discernment of the "sinister or commonplace"

is "dependent" or variable according to "the observer's mood" is a reminder of the technique with which Knister depicts landscape in White Narcissus, for in White Narcissus the landscape can vary according to the "mood" of Richard Milne. However, in "Cab Driver" Knister's use of the same technique is more sophisticated; the relative simplicity of the observed varying according to ~~the mood~~ of the observer becomes complicated by the fact that Jerry Berwind projects his feelings onto his environment in such a way that they consistently fulfill the symbolic suggestions that equate Chicago with Babylon or hell. In White Narcissus, the landscape becomes a screen onto which Richard can project his more or less conscious feelings about his relationship with Ada; in "Cab Driver," the urban environment becomes a screen onto which Berwind projects feelings he is perhaps not always consciously aware of harbouring.)

In the second section, the cabaret is, to Berwind, a shelter from the heat, filth and swarming crowd found just outside the Rainbow Gardens:

Past the group of cab-drivers on the sidewalk went men and women, depressed or exalted, tired or pleasure-bent, sweating in the torrid close air of the August night. Flappers gave their wraps to the boy-friend to carry. The boy-friend would have flapped his hat in front of both their faces, if there had been time, or room in the crowd. A newsboy, a stunted youth of twenty-odd, yelled papers at the corner. Late extra. The policeman on the corner stopped yelling at aberrant drivers who tried to make a right turn against the lights, lifted his cap to wipe his brow, his whistle in his mouth. The smutty bricks of the pavement,

rounded with years of traffic, seemed to sweat. The flat prairie sky seemed to want to descend--into the street, to press down the buildings and crush the people. (pp. 30-31)

Although Knister's image of the scene outside the Rainbo Gardens evokes a doom that seems to await the streets and buildings, the cabaret itself is in Berwind's eyes a bastion of pleasure.

Adding to the suggestion that the Rainbo Gardens represents a heaven of sorts is the association of the place with judgement.

Outside the cabaret a cab driver comments, after the doorman mentions that he receives a salary, there is "No shenangin [sic] around doors of some night joint and dressing up like a judge when you're just a hick'" (p. 29). Later the doorman remarks of the "new girl" (p. 32) who works in the cabaret,

"She ain't been here but a month or two, but she sure has got 'em eatin' outa her hand. The bimbos with the rolls and the butter-n-egg men just fights over her, and they caint git near her. She's perticular who she takes up with. They's a judge from out west, rich as hell, an old man with a grey beard, she likes him." (p. 33)

The doorman subsequently comments of the girl, "She's got 'em all going and she gives 'em all the go-by. All but one rich old fellow, a judge'" (p. 44). The repeated association of a judge, and by extension judgement, with the Rainbo Gardens adds to the suggestion that the cabaret is a heaven of sorts. But the Rainbo Gardens is only a delusive heaven.

The doorman's reference to a new girl working at the cabaret

makes Berwind wonder if she could be the person that his passenger of earlier in the evening is seeking. Berwind finds out that the new girl, Elyria Niemoth, is the "prettiest girl" (p. 44) at the cabaret. According to the doorman, gangsters are looking for her, and he tells Berwind that "'Some says she ran away from New York to git away from 'em'" (p. 44). In the early morning hours, the doorman draws Berwind's attention first to Elyria, and then to a couple leaving the cabaret, and explains that the couple intend to follow Elyria. The doorman steers Elyria to Berwind's cab, as Berwind's car is capable of going very fast. As Elyria enters Berwind's cab, he notices that her eyes are "grey and dark in her fair, pale face" (p. 47). But Berwind's admiration of Elyria is only the prelude to violence.

The third section of the story ends,

"Heavens!" She smothered a scream. "Quick! it's them!"

Berwind was driving at a fair speed, when . . . he saw a huge black sedan bearing down on them at fifty miles an hour. At the same time he saw a curve at his left. He stood on his brakes and the shots they fired at his cab went wild. (p. 60)

Berwind evades the black sedan, but he encounters it again. The third section of "Cab Driver" ends with the brief paragraph, "He met the black sedan, and did not look at it. The VACANT light shone from his cab-top" (p. 60). Berwind exists in a Babylon that encourages one to turn away from others, and even as enticing a place as the Rainbow Gardens is a delusive haven or heaven. The beautiful woman, who

emerges from the place Berwind sees as a kind of heaven, when threatened by violence, uses the word "'Heavens!'" as a curse.

In the first section of "Cab Driver," Berwind's passenger is a hunter, while in the second part of the story his passenger is a hunted person, and by the third section of the story Berwind himself becomes hunted. The second half of the story therefore begins with the implication that Berwind himself is a sort of quarry, even though the particular pursuit with which the third section closes does not continue. Given the symbolic context of Chicago as a hell, Berwind is the prey not of any specific person or faction but of the city itself, and so the violence he comes into contact with is random and sudden, rather than the manifestation of the hostility of any single person or party.

In the fourth section of the novella, while at a restaurant, between being served coffee and food, Berwind notices how "silently" several men in the restaurant are "eating and waiting," and he detects "a tenseness in the air" (p. 80). Without warning,

The thing began to happen. - There was a growl. They didn't seem to need any words. They probably had had quite a little chat before this. But when the growl was uttered, there came a shot. Berwind took one look and leaped the counter. This was no hold-up. They would head for the street, and bullets too. He ducked to the floor . . . . (p. 80)

After barely retaining his life; Berwind returns to his cab, and as he does so the fourth section closes with the brief paragraph, "A

rattle of the Elevated train above his head drowned the noise of his motor" (p. 82). As it becomes clear that the violence of the city is inescapable, the city dwarfs Berwind; in the opening scene of "Cab Driver," Berwind and other cab drivers waiting in a queue can hear their own cars "above the general noise" (p. 1), but, by the end of the fourth section of the story, "the Elevated train above his head" drowns the sound made by Berwind's cab. It is also interesting that the "Elevated" train "above" Berwind drowns the noise of his car; the city literally elevates mechanical contrivances above man. The city diminishes its inhabitants by drowning the sense perceptions, or by assaulting the senses.

In the fifth section, Berwind begins to recover from his harrowing experiences of the night, and continues his work. The temperature cools, and Berwind decides that it is a "peach of a night"; but "Just as he was basking in a general sense of well-being, he became aware of a cab behind him" (p. 88). This cab subsequently forces Berwind to the curb; Berwind sees a lamp-post ahead and tries

not . . . to crock a wheel or tip the bus.

Yes, they'd hurdled the curb, he and his bus. He yanked the emergency and came to the lampost [sic] with a gentle jar from the long heavy front springs, which caused it to shiver and cracked the light globe. (p. 89)

Like the initial image of a line of cabs, with engines running, in a tunnel, and the later scene of the crowded, dirty, and sweltering streets outside the Rainbo Gardens, the image of Berwind's cab brought to a sudden halt evokes the hostility of the urban.

environment toward its inhabitants. The city means pollution, crowding, and man destroying his own carefully constructed, installed, and maintained sources of light. As well, the implication of the randomness, swiftness, and carelessness of the assault upon Berwind is that the effect of the city is to brutalize its inhabitants. The fifth section concludes with a hint that Berwind is about to escape the dictates of "the Babylon of the Chicago night" (p. 11); the section closes with the brief paragraph, "He heaved a long breath, and started his walk home. It was nearly daylight" (p. 100).

The sixth section reveals the effects of Babylon to be inescapable. Berwind "sauntered into the Century Cafe--a small place, with potted tropical plants in the windows on either side of the door." He asks a "girl . . . behind the counter," "'Elyria in?'" (pp. 105-106). Elyria, a waitress, emerges from the kitchen and arrives at Berwind's table. Although Berwind initially teases Elyria in a friendly fashion, he knows that his "general sense of well-being made him careless of everyone else in the place, in the city. They could go to hell. She could too" (p. 107).

Berwind has a petty quarrel with Elyria (p. 107), and her "fresh fair face" becomes "clouded." As Berwind speaks to Elyria, he smiles "inwardly" because she is "submissive." He thinks, "Doubtless if he were less unreasonable, she would tell him to go chase himself, and retire to the counter, with a mocking smile" (p. 108). Just as Berwind becomes a victim of the random brutality of the Chicago

night, Elyria becomes the victim of Berwind's emotional brutality. Berwind's pretence of being "unreasonable" while with Elyria reflects his expectation of similar treatment as a cab driver in the "Babylon of the Chicago night" (p. 11); "The role of the conventional cab-driver demanded that he ignore advances from people in full possession of their faculties" (p. 12).

Berwind reflects that, when he "first met her," Elyria was more "spirited," and this "memory . . . gave an added relish to his sense of mastery now"; "She was in his power now, because she cared more than he did." But the root of Berwind's problem lies in the diabolical nature of the city both he and Elyria inhabit; he thinks, "In this hard-boiled man's town, hurt 'em first, even if you did love them. Then they couldn't hurt you" (p. 109). Both the dancer at the Rainbo Gardens cabaret and the waitress-girlfriend of Berwind are called Elyria, perhaps because both become victims of forms of violence that the city inculcates. The former encounters physical violence and the latter an emotional violence that the physical violence endemic to the city provokes.

In leaving the restaurant, Berwind almost gives Elyria a "tip," but decides that he has "hurt her enough" (p. 112). Part of his pain is his rage at his own brutality; as he goes, Elyria is busy,

beginning to gather his dishes together and put them on a tray. He paused and turned to look at her.

"Be yourself," he muttered. (p. 113)



Berwind's self-knowledge leads him to hope that Elyria can withstand the influence of the Babylon that is Chicago.

Berwind learns more about his passengers of the previous night from a newspaper. The man Berwind drove to the Rainbo Gardens is "Billi de Melio, confederate of Manhattan gangsters," and allegedly has come to Chicago to seek an "artist's model and Virginia heiress" (pp. 116-117). After being shot at twice, almost arrested, and forced to the curb in one night, Berwind wishes he carried a gun (p. 90). It would follow that the revelation of the identities of his first passengers of the night would strengthen his resolve to carry a gun, or increase the chance that he might himself resort to physical violence. In the restaurant scene of the final section of the story, he resorts to emotional violence, and experiences the pain of confronting his own capacity to become brutalized by the city of Chicago. The bleak implication of Berwind's final situation is that he must either become as brutal as the city itself or leave.

Glimpses of a life better than the one Berwind leads are an integral part of "Cab Driver." In all six sections of the novella reminders of countryside life and nature, or the pastoral, appear. Such references function in two ways: in part pastoral references serve as a reminder that there exists an alternative to the brutalizing hell of Chicago, while the urban degradation of the pastoral illustrates the extent to which the city of Chicago is a hell.

Berwind expresses his appreciation of the cab assigned to him in terms that are reminders of the pastoral. He is fond of his car as

one of the rapid, "little, narrow-rumped 'French hacks' as the drivers called them" (p. 5). At one point he gets out of his cab thinking that it has "a high seat reminding you of old-fashioned horse cabs" (p. 41). But, during the shooting at the restaurant, Berwind hears people "scrambling" to hiding places and sounding "like the hooves of horses" (p. 81).

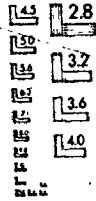
As Berwind muses that his working environment and pay are unenviable, he asks himself, "What would his professors at the University of Toronto say to see him now?" (p. 36). Berwind's carefully noting the grounds of another university as he drives through Chicago again suggests his appreciation of his Canadian university life:

They were going down the straightaway of the Midway Plaisance which joins the two huge parks, Washington, and Jackson. On either hand lay huge old or ivied [sic] University Buildings, set far back in grass and shadowy trees. The lights along the wide double drive seemed to throw a mist about the trees and buildings. (p. 56)

Berwind perceives the university grounds as a green, tranquil oasis of civilization in the midst of the roar, stench, and filth of Chicago.

Nevertheless, if there is evidence that Berwind links his Canadian past with a degree of civilization not generally seen in Chicago, he at least consciously denies his past. During the night Berwind chats with a cab driver who mentions having worked in various cities, and Berwind raises the subject of Canada:

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"Were you ever," Berwind asked him, "in Toronto, Ontario?"

"Yes, I drove there a while. You come from there?"

"I been there. I should think driving would be more interesting though in Montreal." (p. 65)

Berwind solicits another's view of Toronto, but he is unwilling to discuss the subject himself. Knister delineates but does not define Berwind's reasons for wanting to forget his Canadian past:

he did not like waiting in line in stations. Besides, jerks were usually all you got. And the people you got, travelling people from out of town, were like the people he had got away from long ago, when there was time. Railway depots reminded you of too many things anyway; partings, fearful changes, loss, regrets. Stations made you uncomfortable whether you remembered such things or not, and he thought that many drivers felt that way about them whether they knew it or not. (p. 7)

Berwind consciously rejects his Canadian, and probably pastoral, past. Yet he unconsciously longs for a pastoral world. As he drives through the Babylon of Chicago, he is acutely aware of when he approaches a "park region" (p. 53). The city itself mirrors Berwind's split attitude of unconscious attraction toward and conscious contempt for pastoral life. On one side of an "avenue" appear "stone, marble, plate glass hotels, porticos, brazen, bronze window-fittings," while there are "the trees of the Park shadowy on the other" (p. 11).

The city is a mainly sterile landscape offering such grim sights as "vast gloomy warehouses, factories, dark and with strange red irradiations coming from their windows" (p. 85). Only removal from

the city allows a glimpse of the truly pastoral; "streets . . . improved toward the Lake" (p. 19). The city actually repels nature:

The street was bright enough now, with the flaring street lights, the occasional open restaurant, the window signs, and the reflections from all of these in the gleaming black wet pavement. The source of this moisture (rain could scarcely penetrate the elevated railway above the street) trundled on ahead of Berwind two or three blocks. It was one of the city's huge water-wagons. (p. 77)

Knister's Chicago does not merely discourage things pastoral, but literally excludes nature.

The city as a physical environment becomes the antithesis of the pastoral, not only by barring nature (at least in the form of rain), but as well by degrading what representatives of the pastoral may try to exist in Babylon. For example, the mobster de Melio tells Berwind, "I know what Chicago parks are like. I've been lost in them" (p. 16). One can only imagine that de Melio had reasons other than contemplating the beauties of nature for being in different Chicago parks. Hearing de Melio's comment reminds Berwind that he has himself "driven a drunken man about these parks for hours" (p. 17).

Representatives of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms of nature undergo degradation in the hell of Chicago; natural building materials become the stuff of the grave, for the city is where a killer can stalk the streets and ensure that others "get the stony bed, or the wooden suit" (p. 70). Berwind thinks that Elyria Niemoth is "some kid, all right, tall, and set up like a deer with horns";

"She wasn't like these warped-board flapper kids pulling their wraps around their skinny haunches" (p. 72). In Babylon, parks become only part of the palette of the city's colours. As he drives, Berwind notices "Humboldt Park. A wilderness of green, black shadows. Bluish pavements curving. A red tail-light glided ahead" (p. 87). The city swallows its own parks. Upon returning to the garage after being forced to the curb, Berwind reports that the incident happened "'up in Humboldt Park'" (p. 96). In Knister's Chicago there are no truly pastoral refuges.

In the last section of "Cab Driver," Berwind's latent longing for the pastoral emerges, if perhaps more to the reader than to Berwind himself. The very prospect of experiencing the excuses for the pastoral that Chicago can offer makes the city more palatable to Berwind; on his way to the beach, he forgets the stench of the slaughterhouse and the concentration of gasoline fumes in a tunnel, and instead finds the air "laden with gasoline, perfume, pop-corn, oranges, leather. The exciting odor of the summer city" (p. 114). Yet, when Berwind actually is at the beach, he sees, near a new hotel, "a cement drive . . . with a low wall . . . like the ramp at the Grand Central Station in New York" (p. 115). Chicago offers Berwind a mucky version of pastoral bliss: "He trudged across the weedy waste, to the broad beach of light sand which rose about the tops of his oxfords, and walked on the packed wet sand" (p. 116). Even the beaches on the fringe of Babylon are inhospitable to man.

A curious remark on the penultimate page of "Cab Driver" may be

seen as summing up the extent of Berwind's brutalization. He thinks of the hunted cabaret dancer who had been his passenger on the previous night in unusual terms; "He admired her as he would have admired a fine painting or a magnificent horse in action" (p. 117). Yet on the last (extant) page of the story Berwind thinks she is one of "the strange thrillers you met," who are best ensconced in "a little gallery in your mind," and from whom it is best to "keep away" (p. 118). Berwind associates both the pastoral world and the world of art with the cabaret dancer, or with distant, aloof beauty. Finally, for Berwind, the beauty of the pastoral becomes the beauty of the unattainable. In the absence of either a conclusion to "Cab Driver" or clearer reasons as to why Berwind rejects his presumably pastoral past, it is difficult to arrive at conclusions about Berwind's final position. Perhaps the extent of his brutalization is such that he can no longer even conceive of partaking of pastoral pleasures beyond those feeble few offered within the limits of Babylon. A more cynical reading might be that--like the protagonist of Orwell's 1984--he becomes brutalized to the point that he relishes his oppression. If such is the case, the point about Berwind is ultimately that the hell of Chicago reduces him to a satisfied inhabitant of Babylon.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Letter received from Dr. K.E. Garay, Archivist, McMaster Library, Hamilton, Ontario, 23 January 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Raymond Knister to his parents, 31 July 1927. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this letter will appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Murtha, Letter to Raymond Knister, 6 June 1927. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Raymond Knister to his parents, 14 May 1928. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Raymond Knister to his parents, 28 November 1928. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this letter will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Raymond Knister to his parents, 1 August 1930. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this letter will appear in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Dr. K.E. Garay, Archivist, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario, 4 December 1984.

<sup>8</sup> "Cab Driver," TS, Box 11. 118 pp. and 3 miscellaneous pages. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this material will be included in the text.

<sup>9</sup> The typed titles which appear at the top of the pages of the text are: "Cab Driver" (pp. 28, 34, 42, 79-118), "The Cab Driver" (pp. 2, 16, 17, 21-27, 29-33, 35-41, 43-44, 69-72), "The Hack Driver" (pp. 1, 3-15, 18-20), "Taxi Driver" (pp. 56-57, 60-61, 76-78), "The Taxi Driver" (pp. 45, 50-55, 58-59, 73-74), "The Taxi Cab Driver" (pp. 64, 66-68), "Taxi War" (pp. 62-63, 75), "Taxi Drivers Get Hard Boiled" (p. 46), "Hacks in Line" (p. 47), "Taxis in Line" (p. 48), "Tough Break" (p. 49) and "The Taxi Cab War" (p. 65).

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Knister, "Bunin Does Story That is Regarded by Critics as One of Greatest of Age," rev. of The Gentleman From San Francisco and Other Stories, by Ivan A. Bunin, The Border Cities Star, 14 July 1923, p. 9, col. 3. Subsequent references to this review will be



included in the text.

<sup>11</sup> I.A. Bunin, The Gentleman From San Francisco and Other Stories, trans. D.H. Lawrence, S.S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923). Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Murtha, Letter to Raymond Knister, 16 March 1927. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>13</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister: a Biographical Note," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Knister, "Purposes of Fiction," The New Outlook, 13 October 1926, p. 16, col. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Knister, "The Wonders of Man," The New Outlook, 9 February 1927, p. 15, cols. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Knister, "Hackman's Night," in The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint, No. 17, ed. and introd. Peter Stevens (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 208.

## Chapter VII My Star Predominant: Images of Keats

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

Marcus Waddington notes that Knister wrote the novel My Star Predominant between 1929 and 1931.<sup>1</sup> In 1931, My Star Predominant won the Graphic Publishers' Canadian Novel Contest first prize of twenty-five hundred dollars (p. 217). However, the bankruptcy of Graphic Publishers delayed publication of the novel (p. 221), which appeared only after Knister drowned; "My Star Predominant was published in 1934, two years after his death, by Andrew Melrose of London and Ryerson Press of Toronto" (p. 217).

The adjudicators for the Graphic award were the writer Frederick Philip Grove, Barker Fairley, who taught German at the University of Toronto, and W.T. Allison, who taught English at the University of Manitoba.<sup>2</sup> In a letter of 25 December 1930, Grove tells Knister that, if he can reduce the length of his novel, "I can almost promise publication" (p. 283). The typescript versions of My Star Predominant reflect Knister's work toward reducing the volume of the novel.

Versions of My Star Predominant exist in three archival collections. A carbon copy of a seven-hundred and twenty page typescript version is among The Raymond Knister Papers at McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.<sup>3</sup> The paper of this copy has

different watermarks: "Progress Bond" and "Luxor Bond."<sup>4</sup> The original typescript of seven hundred and twenty pages is in The Raymond Knister Collection of Victoria University Library.<sup>5</sup> Watermarks of the paper of this version are "Progress Bond," "Luxor Bond" and "Algonquin Bond."<sup>6</sup> Victoria University Library also holds a typescript version of three-hundred and forty-nine pages.<sup>7</sup> The paper of this typescript has the watermarks "Abermill Bond" and "Luxor Bond."<sup>8</sup> The three hundred and forty-nine page typescript version, a carbon copy of this version, and the galleys of the novel are among the Knister Papers at Queen's University Archives.<sup>9</sup> Watermarks of the paper of this typescript are "Abermill Bond," "Luxor Bond," and "Underwood Bond."<sup>10</sup> All the typescript versions of My Star Predominant are on white typing paper, and the frequency of handwritten revisions included decreases with the length of the successive versions. Both the longer and shorter typed versions of the work bear the title "My Star Predominant: Portrait of John Keats." However, the copy of the shorter typed version held at Queen's University has a title page on which the title "Lone Splendour: Portrait of John Keats" appears.

The novel's protagonist, John Keats, becomes more prominent as Knister pares away material about Keats's milieu in the successive versions of the work. For example, in the earlier version, dialogue details Charles Lamb's teasing of a sycophant trying to introduce himself to William Wordsworth (p. 263); Knister deletes this dialogue, replacing it with a brief, descriptive reference, in the later version of the work, which became the published text.<sup>11</sup> Knister similarly

deletes inconsequential remarks Leigh Hunt makes (p. 638) in the course of a scene describing Mrs. Hunt "cutting a silhouette" of Keats (p. 277). The effect of Knister's deletion is to make Keats, previously part of a domestic scene, the focus of attention.

## 2. The Action

Knister's novel deals with the last years of the life of John Keats. These years, the most productive in the life of the poet, were a time of turmoil. My Star Predominant describes the death of the poet's brother, Tom, as a result of consumption, the relationship of Keats and Fanny Brawne, and the poet's last days, as he lies dying of consumption, in Italy.

## 3. Influences and Sources

Knister chose to write a fiction based on biographical fact about Keats, rather than a biography. In a "Foreword" dated 7 May 1930, that does not appear in the published version of My Star Predominant, Knister writes,

This book, I believe, is trustworthy as biography; but it is a novel first, and I hope that no one will care to make a complete roll of the plagiarisms by which my characters speak words they did use, as a matter of fact, in letters and other writing: 12

Comparison of My Star Predominant with Knister's sources reveals the justness of Knister's description of his work. As Knister's research notes show, four sources for My Star Predominant are Keats's letters, Amy Lowell's biography of Keats, J. Middleton Murry's study of Keats, and a critical work arguing that the poetry of Mary Tighe influenced Keats's poetry.<sup>13</sup>

Knister uses the Keats letters to lend the authenticity of Keats's own voice to the thought and speech presented in My Star Predominant. For example, in a letter of 31 October 1816, Keats remarks of his appointment to meet the painter Haydon, "I will be as punctual as the Bee to the Clover."<sup>14</sup> In Knister's novel, Keats resolves to be "as punctual as the bee to the clover" (p. 49) for his meeting with Haydon. After seeing a friend of his love, Fanny Brawns, in a letter Keats laments Fanny's admiration for her friend; he finds Fanny as "superior" to her friend as "a Rose" is "to a Dandelion" (I, p. 276). In My Star Predominant, it crosses Keats's mind that "The two girls were like rose and dandelion" (p. 193). The historical Keats mentions in a letter to his young sister, Fanny Keats,

I ordered some bulbous roots for you at the Gardeners, and they sent me some, but they were all in bud--and could not be sent . . . There are some beautiful heaths now in bloom in Pots--either heaths or some seasonable plants I will send you instead--perhaps some that are not yet in bloom that you may see them come out. (II, p. 312)

Knister uses Keats's remarks as the basis for presenting thought and

dialogue. Keats thinks that "The gardener from whom he had ordered some bulbs for Fanny Keats sent him bulbs in flower, which couldn't be sent through the post." He asks Fanny Brawne what he can send to his sister as a substitute:

"What would you advise me to get for her, now?"

"I have seen some beautiful heaths in bloom in pots. But they should not be in bloom, so that she can see them come out. Children make so much of such things." (p. 211)

Knister uses details Keats mentions in letters, and adapts these for the purpose of characterization.

Amy Lowell's massive 1925 biography of over twelve hundred pages, John Keats, also provided Knister with a great deal of biographical information. In his "Foreword," Knister states that in his novel "characters speak words they did use, as a matter of fact, in letters and other writing." The "other writing" Knister refers to involves reviews and memoirs that Lowell cites. For example, Lowell quotes Leigh Hunt's review of Keats's poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," a review that closes, "the whole conclusion is . . . powerful and quiet."<sup>15</sup> Knister presents Keats as reading Hunt's review and finding Hunt's conclusion especially attractive; "Those words ran in his mind: powerful and quiet" (p. 54).

Lowell repeatedly quotes from memoirs, and information from these memoirs appears in My Star Predominant. For example, Lowell cites Charles Brown's account of Keats discovering that he has consumption:

before his head was on the pillow, he slightly coughed, and I heard him say,--'That is blood from my mouth.' I went towards him; he was examining a single drop of blood upon the sheet. 'Bring me the candle, Brown, and let me see this blood.' After regarding it steadfastly he looked up in my face, with a calmness of countenance that I can never forget, and said, --'I know the colour of that blood;--it is arterial blood;--I cannot be deceived in that colour;--that drop of blood is my death-warrant; --I must die.' I ran for a surgeon . . . . (II, 389)

Knister's version of Brown's recollection differs not in substance but in presentation; Knister vivifies the scene by giving immediacy to the dialogue and gestures Brown recalls:

he leaped into the cold sheets. Brown was coming into the room for the taper. "C-cold!" Keats coughed slightly.. "That is blood from my mouth." He stared at the single drop upon the pillow. "Bring me the candle, Brown, and let me see."

He regarded the blood steadfastly, while Brown's face set with apprehension. He handed the candle to Brown, looking into his face with a great calm.

"I know the colour of that blood--it is arterial blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour--that drop of blood is my death-warrant. I must die." He listened to Brown's footsteps running on the hard ground. (pp. 247-8)

Another source that Knister referred to in his research for his novel is John Middleton Murry's 1925 study, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820. Murry argues:

Shakespeare was veritably Keats' forerunner and secret-sharer not merely in literature, but in life. That opposition between literature and life is, in the case of . . . Shakespeare and Keats,

impossible finally to maintain . . . .

For Murry, "The basis of likeness between Shakespeare and Keats lies in a similar completeness of humanity confronted with the same world of experience."<sup>16</sup> Murry notes that Keats himself saw the degree of "life-experience" (p. 195) in a work as a criterion of evaluation, and refers to Keats's "complete loyalty to experience" (p. 140). According to Murry, the work of Keats deals with "beauties seen or remembered or imagined," and the poetry of Keats involves "comprehension by and through the concrete and particular" (p. 18). Knister also presents Keats as a writer whose "life-experience" is continuous with his work. While in Canterbury, and working on "Endymion," Keats finds that "Canterbury's age-old streets put new life into the poem. The highest gust of these days was to . . . shape living moments for Endymion and his goddess" (p. 92). Knister's Keats declares, "'No doubt I shall draw the fire of the precisians and pedants who prefer an abstraction to a flower'" (p. 100). Keats's poem "Lamia" tells of "The young man Lycius," who encounters "a fair gentlewoman." However, "His tutor, Apollonius, a realist, comes to the wedding feast and reveals that she is a lamia, a serpent in human guise. 'She vanishes, and Lycius dies'" (p. 220). When Keats and Brown disagree in their views of Fanny Brawne, Brown comments;

"I haven't met my fate. If I had I would  
put her out of my mind."

"Thanks, Apollonius," thought Keats.  
A flush of anger rose over him . . . . (p. 222)



Like Murry, Knister indicates the continuity between the work and the life of Keats.

Murry's sub-title is A Study of Keats' Poetic Life From 1816 to 1820, and Murry explains;

The whole poetic story of Keats is contained in four years. He died on 23rd February 1821; his fatal haemorrhage, after which he wrote practically no poetry, occurred in February 1820.

Those four years are the most prodigious four years in the life of genius of which we have record. (p. 13)

Murry concentrates on Keats's active years as a poet, while Lowell begins by discussing Keats's grandparents and ends her study with Keats's final months in Italy, and includes the autopsy and funeral of Keats. My Star Predominant begins with Keats eagerly going to meet Hunt, who first published the work of Keats, (in the spring of 1816), and ends with the physical death of Keats (in the February of 1821). Knister follows Murry in concentrating on Keats's years of literary activity, but departs from Murry in depicting Keats till the time of his death. In contrast, Murry largely overlooks the final months of Keats in Italy, a time when Keats was too ill to do very much work. Murry asserts that, as a writer, Keats found experience important; Knister shows Keats as a writer whose work and experience are continuous, and so evokes the "life-experience" of Keats from just after his work is first published until his death at the age of twenty-five.

The final focus of Knister's depiction of Keats involves the

central use of images, a subject that Knister's nineteen-twenties sources repeatedly touch on. Lowell states that Keats "delighted in pictures made out of words" (I, p. 93), and refers to Keats's "preoccupation" with "images" (I, p. 103). Presumably speaking as an imagist poet, Lowell detects in the work of Keats the impulse to "stamp into a picture" what he "saw"; Lowell remarks, "To-day we should call it an 'image,'" adding, "But Keats knew nothing of 'images'" (I, p. 125). Murry claims "the finest kind of poetry" involves "a perception of the general in the particular" (p. 22), and prefers the kind of "vivid image" Keats could create, when allowing his work to reflect experience, to the "abstract images" in which, Murry claims, Keats sought "refuge from the anguish of life" (p. 51) while nursing his dying brother, Tom. According to Murry, Keats can move "from concrete perception to concrete perception, from image to image" (p. 120). Perhaps the most telling source for Knister's concentration on images in a work about Keats is the 1928 study Keats and Mary Tighe. In this study, Earle Weller argues that although the "vogue of Mrs. Tighe's poetry was short-lived,"<sup>17</sup> Keats "drew many an image and many a phrase" (p. xii) from Tighe's work. Weller states,

In the earlier poems and in Endymion Keats was content merely to weave the vivid words and phrases of Mrs. Tighe into the fabric of his verse. In The Eve of St. Agnes, however, as well as in the odes and La Belle Dame sans Merci he draws not only on the phrases but the images as well. (xii)

Knister, under the heading "Keats & Mary Tighe," copied into his

research notes,

In each of his poems & Endymion K. content merely to weave vivid words & phrases of Mrs. T. into the fabric of his verse. In Eve of St. Agnes, odes, & Belle dame, draws not only on phrases but images as well. (p. 80)

Weller's selection of Keats's poems on the basis of "images" caught Knister's eye and, interestingly enough, the poems Weller mentions receive the most specific attention in My Star Predominant, although Knister's acceptance of Weller's thesis is a moot question.

#### 4. Context

Waddington notes that Knister "moved to a small farm house on Lake Erie, a few miles east of Port Dover" in order to work on My Star Predominant, and concentrated his efforts on writing the novel (pp. 214-215). Knister's widow recalls that, while Knister worked on the novel, he preferred not to have reading matter other than Keats research material in the house.<sup>18</sup>

The question arises of why Knister chose Keats as the subject of a novel and, to some extent, the answer lies in Knister's own work as a poet, critic, and prose fiction writer. Images have such characteristic centrality in Knister's poetry that Marcus Waddington associates Knister's work with the movement in poetry known as imagism:

In the creation of his poems Knister followed what he took to be Ezra Pound's Crédo, "the idea . . . that each poem should comprise an Image, and that this Image should

not be blurred by extraneous matter." Pound defined "Image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." He held that a good poem was one in which the emotions conjured up by the rhythms of the word were in perfect harmony with the idea or fragments of ideas expressed. The visual element or "the casting of images upon the visual imagination" provided the third dimension of the harmonious "Image." The majority of Knister's poems in his Collected Poems satisfy Pound's definition of the "Image."<sup>19</sup>

Knister's interest in "imagism" crossed whatever border there is between poetry and prose and, as Glenn Hughes remarks, the imagist poets can be seen as "exploring the borderland between verse and prose."<sup>20</sup> In 1926, Knister writes that the techniques of precise diction and keen observation, if originally recommended by the imagist poets, "are a part of all good writing, prose and verse."<sup>21</sup>

Peter Jones notes that Ford Madox Ford's injunction to the imagist poets was that "'poetic ideas are best expressed by the rendering of concrete objects."<sup>22</sup> Jones describes imagist poems as involving "presentation rather than representation," and "a strong sense of the abstract caught within the concrete." He adds that the imagist poem "is not merely description, but evocation" (p. 31). Knister's prose fiction includes images that reflect a "sense of the abstract . . . within the concrete," and an impulse to explore the possibilities of the "evocation" of the magic of everyday reality. In his thesis, Waddington notes that Knister's short stories can "bear a resemblance to . . . Imagist poems" of Knister's, in that "the intellectual element, or theme, is carefully woven about the visual

element, or the succession of images" (pp. 175-176). Knister himself identifies "a sort of symbolic imagism" in the short stories of Chekhov.<sup>23</sup> However, Knister's own work may represent "a sort of symbolic imagism" in that the images in his prose fiction evoke the extraordinary nature of everyday things; the image of everyday life in and of itself can have symbolic force. Dorothy Livesay observes that "Knister's very strong sense of imagery, the imagery of sound as well as sight, makes his prose leap into life."<sup>24</sup> Knister's images involve the sights or sounds of experiential reality, and point to the abstract or intangible in evoking the concrete or tangible. In My Star Predominant, image patterns play a central role in Knister's depiction of Keats.

#### 5. Critical Reception

The Times Literary Supplement 1934 review of My Star Predominant notes that "the fascination of" the novel "cannot be gainsaid," even though the work "is a carefully composed and not unduly imaginative reconstruction of the life of Keats." Knister's "liberal use of Keats's own letters" receives mention. Praise is given to Knister's treatment of "Keats's relations with . . . the ill-fated Tom," if "the ordeal of Tom's sick-bed is almost too painfully protracted."<sup>25</sup>

Two Canadian reviews of My Star Predominant, which appeared at the time of the novel's publication, leave opposite impressions of the work. Robert Ayre's review, in Saturday Night, declares that

"Knister has brought John Keats to life." Ayre describes the novel as being, "in the richest meaning of the word, a re-creation," and finds My Star Predominant an "intensely moving story."<sup>26</sup> However, the Globe's unsigned review, "Keats and His Ailment," states,

Never squeamish, Mr. Knister does not hesitate to introduce the baser frailties of the Victorian age, nor yet does he spare the reader in the matter of his hero's disease.

The review notes that Knister's "fictionalized life of John Keats" is "readable and instructive," and concludes that the work is "interesting," if "not satisfying."<sup>27</sup>

No study of My Star Predominant currently exists.

## II. My Star Predominant

Knister's use of images is of central importance in My Star Predominant. In the course of the novel, images reflect the growth of Keats's consciousness, and his final ability to see the power of imaginative recreation. Like the title of the novel, the use of images in My Star Predominant ultimately suggests the endurance of the power of the great artist's vision.

Images are of vital importance to Knister's Keats. Keats thinks of his love, Fanny Brawne, in terms of images; the "indelible image of Fanny Brawne" haunts him (p. 22), and he reaches the point of thinking that all "but the image of her was chaff in his mouth"

(p. 282). The result of separation from Fanny is that "Every thought and every dream led to Fanny, to images of Fanny in every gesture and expression of hers" (p. 277).

Keats thinks of "poetry" in terms of "images." Early in My Star Predominant, as Keats sits "by the window in his new quarters" and tries "to write the poem which had come to him" while on a walk,

the feeling of elation which had overwhelmed him was not to be slaked by many lines of light and shapely, dewy and dulcet images. The fresh woodland would serve him as a sort of springboard from which to dive into deeper delight and meaning. Why, the ripples of a stream and its cresses gave to one another benefits like good men in their sincerities. And what was love but a golden-winged butterfly nestling a rose, convulsed as though it smarted from over-pleasure?  
(p. 24)

Knister virtually has Keats define poetry as a matter of creating images, when he has Keats think of poetry as "lines of light and shapely, dewy and dulcet images." The passage concludes by demonstrating the possible evocative power of an image. Later Knister actually depicts Keats in the process of converting a visual image into a verbal one:

Evening found the three brothers together in the glow of their fireplace, drowsy from the good supper and the activities of the day. How shrunken seemed the world, with its mean concerns . . . . Keats glanced at his brothers, whose eyes seemed to rest in a poetic, a visionary sleep upon the glow of the embers. Would that their lives could be thus tranquil throughout! George would make his way . . . . But what of delicate Tom? If his health never

improved, he might lack means of subsistence. But he would never want so long as his brothers lived.

John sprang up: the fire was low and he picked up the scuttle and spread fresh coal over it. Before sitting down he brought paper and quill and ink. It should be . . . for Tom's birthday. No, it should be "To My Brothers." They, reading and drowsing, beyond a smile of recognition scarcely noted his occupation. By and by they cracked nuts and drank wine and quaffed the sonnet as John read it, retasting at second hand the quietness of "this world's true joys," in midst of the pangs of bereavements, and change, loneliness, precarious chance. (p. 51)

Knister shows Keats in the process of writing a particular poem, a process which consists of converting a visual image into a verbal one, and elsewhere Knister makes the connection of poet and image-maker even more explicit:

He was not ready to write, and yet. . . . he did commence. A bright April day lured him out upon the hills and among the trees, but he sharpened his quill. This moment would live . . . . His first line had been held ready for years . . . . "A thing of beauty is a constant joy" lacked something . . . . Until now there had been no poem lovely enough and great enough for that line. He wrote it once more with the old thrill: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." Then his pen moved soberly, almost sadly, led as many a time before from image to image almost without his will. (p. 88)

Knister presents Keats writing a poem, ("Endymion," the first line of which is "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever"),<sup>28</sup> a process described as being a matter of moving, "as many a time before from image to



image." Earlier in My Star Predominant, Keats regrets that "walks and talks" he would like to crystallize in poetry "were not to be evoked so simply. Or when they were evoked, the poem seemed to have vanished" (p. 24). In other words, Knister shows Keats conceiving of poetry as a matter of creating evocative images. Knister's Keats remembers, loves, conceives of poetry, and sees the world around him in terms of images. As Keats and his friend Severn walk, they see

A vast old chestnut . . . overspreading the lane, and a great tract on either side of it. A light flurry of wind had struck its outer branches, and afar off could be heard a great surging which approached nearer every second. "The tide, the tide!" cried John delightedly, seizing Severn's arm and leaping upon a stile to watch its approach across the meadow grasses. He did not stir until the tide was flowing all about him, past him into a field of ripening barley, while his rapture made his eyes gleam and a slight smile appear on his parted lips. He was not to be dragged away. (p. 107)

Knister provides an image of Keats in ecstatic response to the beauty of the scene before him. Toward the close of the novel, Keats remarks,

"Severn. Do you remember that walk we took in the country, so long ago, beyond Hampstead and Caen Wood, and how we watched the tide of the oats field, the long rippling waves in the breeze. The tide! The tide!" (p. 309)

Knister demonstrates that Keats not only "sees" in terms of images, but as well remembers in terms of images, and it follows that Keats thinks of poetry as the making of evocative images. Knister's emphasis

on "the tide" Keats sees becomes evident in Knister's adaptation of his source. Severn has Keats "affected" by the wind swaying "masses of chestnut or oak foliage," but Knister has Keats moved by a particular "vast old chestnut" tree. While Severn describes Keats appreciating "the passage of the wind upon the meadow-grasses or young corn" (Lowell, I, 96-97), Knister's Keats watches the wind ripple "a field of ripening barley." Although Knister expands the scene, he sharpens its constituent details, making an evocative image of Severn's more generic description.

In the context of My Star Predominant, references to Keats as an image-maker introduce a series of images that evoke the increasing range and, by implication, power of Keats's vision. Early in the novel Keats concentrates on capturing in his poetry images of what is familiar to him through his surroundings. The suggestion is that extraordinarily evocative images of ordinary life are the basis of his art, but images become as well the means with which Knister evokes the growth of Keats's vision.

Very early in My Star Predominant, Knister makes his reader aware of the delicate health of Tom Keats. Tom first appears in the novel when he visits his brother to give him "important news"; Mr. Abbey, the executor of the various Keats family estates (p. 29) has, Tom tells his brother, "consented to advance me enough money to go abroad" (p. 20). Abbey's consent is the consequence of a doctor telling him that Tom "would be better in France, in Lyons" because "it is a good, healthy place" (p. 20). After Tom's announcement, the brothers depart

for dinner at "a clean-looking chop-house" (p. 21) but, as they leave the chop-house, Tom is "flushed with the meal and the walk" even though it is "a mild evening"; as they part Keats tells Tom, "'Don't catch cold, now'" (p. 22).

The brothers are very close to each other; they share rooms, and Tom tells his brother "in a naive, moved voice" of his hope that "you may be as great a poet as you want" (p. 31). As a newly-qualified surgeon (p. 33), John Keats is in a peculiarly good position to assess the state of his brother's health; Keats notices that "Tom, though always slight, had before seemed more wiry, vigorous and well-coloured" (p. 99), and this observation causes anxiety:

as John lay awake in the night, it was of Tom . . . that he thought in the darkness. Perhaps Tom had consumption as their mother had had, and died of it. (p. 101)

Keats knows that Tom "should go away for the winter," but Abbey will provide only enough money for Tom to leave London: "It should have been Lisbon, but Abbey would not forthcome" (p. 118). Tom's health becomes "worse" and his doctor "privately" admits to Keats "that it was probably the consumption" (p. 121). And with persistent bad health Tom becomes "querulous" (p. 138). Keats fights morbidity, thinking that

The truth was, there was something real in the world, which nothing could take from a man, once he had laid hold upon it; not even Tom's fresh spitting of blood. (p. 143)

Knister's draft version of the above passage clarifies the way that Keats's reaction to Tom's illness is made part of the process of Keats's broadening vision:

The truth was, there was something real in the world, distilled from friendship and enmity, love and hate, good and ill, which nothing could take from a man, once he had laid hold of it. Even Tom's spitting blood again could not shake the real. (p. 302)

The draft version of the passage makes explicit what the later version evokes--namely, that the sickness of Tom has the effect of enlarging the vision with which Keats comes to the writing of poetry, or the making of evocative images. Again, too, emphasis is on poetic vision being based on experience.

Keats returns from a vacation to learn that Tom's "condition is not improving" (p. 146). Tom is "in bed--wasted and worn, his eyes enormous" (p. 147). For Keats, his brother's declining health is a "nightmare progressively intensified" (p. 170).

Knister's description of Tom's death is minimal:

He rose and wiped his brother's brow. Tom did not open his eyes . . . . At four o'clock the doctor stumbled into the candlelight from the wintry void. At eight o'clock Tom was no longer living. The sun was rising; the candles were blown out. (p. 189)

There is relatively little attention drawn to Tom's actual death, but Knister gives an elaborate description of Keats's response to the horror of his brother's fatal illness:

Tom turned his face to the ceiling and closed his eyes. John leaned his face upon his palm and watched. A bitterness such as he had never known crept into his heart and flooded out every other feeling, as though never again would he taste anything but gall, or speak words save of rancour. His mind was stilled, no words came into it; he only knew the end of all ends made such things as love, happiness, beauty, even pain, mere words. There was only, awaiting even these, and men and women who floundered through them, nothingness, futility. Was that . . . life . . . --to refine means of making it naught? Ah, it was to him that such thoughts could come. Tom had to fight for every breath, while every breath put him deeper into the black pit which would finally swallow his struggles.

Suddenly Tom coughed, sharply, involuntarily. Keats rose. A large bright drop of blood, a dribble of smaller ones, lay upon the sheet. He held the candle. Yes, bright, brilliant, scarlet, that blood. Arterial. There was no long time now. He put the candle upon the table and stood a moment, his hands to his head. Then he ran downstairs, and sent . . . for Dr. Sawrey. (p. 183)

Knister places more emphasis upon Keats's reaction to Tom's illness than the actual death of Tom, and Knister does so by presenting the image of a horrified, embittered and angered Keats standing over his brother's bed, raising a candle to see in its light the bright arterial blood of his brother. Although Keats is initially totally embittered, his bitterness recedes to leave an aching world-weariness in which he struggles to grasp the realities that the words "love, happiness, beauty, even pain" signify.

In other words, the prospect of the death of his brother forces Keats to confront evil and to fight for a sense of a balance between evil and good. Knister depicts Keats as intellectually, if not

emotionally, recognizing the need to balance good and evil at what is roughly the mid-point of the novel:

John Keats sat down on a rock covered with dried seaweed and limpets. With his sea before him he should have been at peace; but even the tranquil ocean waited only for a piercing gaze to show the shark at savage prey. Eternal, fierce destruction was the lot of life: the hawk at pounce, the robin ravaging a worm. It was simple enough to love the good, it was wisdom to see it needful to love the good and ill--to love life as a majestic pattern of those two; but, confronted with the pain and evil, how bring oneself to it? Easy to love beauty, hard to love beauty in all things . . . . (p. 140)

At the approximate mid-point of My Star Predominant, Keats struggles to maintain a sense of the beauty of life without denying "the pain and evil," or to "love beauty in all things." Yet he has difficulty in accepting the premise that the "pain and evil" of life do not spoil beauty; he can accept the idea of loving "beauty in all things," but cannot really convince himself to feel that this premise is true. When confronted by Tom's imminent death, Keats begins to accept emotionally, as well as intellectually, that it is "wisdom to see it needful to love the good and ill." The key word is "see"; in Knister's visual image of Keats standing over Tom's bed and shedding candlelight in which he can see the bright arterial blood that spells Tom's doom, Knister evokes the dawn of Keats's emotional acceptance of that which he already intellectually accepts--the "wisdom to see it needful to love the good and ill." Knister's image of Keats standing at his brother's bed implies the development of Keats's vision, as the image fixes the moment at which Keats comes to arrive at an understanding of

the difficulty of loving "beauty in all things."

Another image connected with Tom evokes the growth of Keats's vision. After Tom's death, and when Keats himself is ill, he sees something on Hampstead Heath that brings Tom to mind:

He rose in the night and stared across the snowy Heath. A white figure stirred; not a ghost, or was it?--it was a rabbit standing on its haunches, cocking its ears at the house. Keats watched, entranced, while it dropped and loped silently and deliberately around the house. He got into bed again, warned by a cough, but still he saw the rabbit; its ears twitching, pinkish its eyes. Hadn't an animal a will and a purpose; you had only to see their bright eyes. It had gone searching around the house, spirit-like. If you could believe in ghosts, you would have to admit that that must be Tom's spirit. He rose again, and again the rabbit was before his window. Was it reproaching his eternal thoughts of Fanny? He was alone . . . The rabbit was aware that he watched it solicitously, and picked its way carefully among the bushes. (pp. 196-7).

Knister's Keats considers the possibility that the apparently friendly rabbit he sees on Hampstead Heath may be a reincarnation of Tom, or be somehow possessed by Tom's spirit. Whether or not the rabbit Keats sees is an ordinary bunny is immaterial. The point is that Keats's vision has expanded to the extent that he can seriously entertain the possibility that the rabbit on the Heath may "be Tom's spirit."

Knister again uses an image to suggest the growth of Keats's vision.

Knister's image of the rabbit Keats sees on the heath elaborates upon an episode Lowell mentions. At the time Keats saw the rabbit, he was sharing Brown's half of a house called Wentworth Place; the other half of the house belonged to Charles Wentworth Dilke, another friend

of Keats. Lowell depicts Keats as being unbalanced by his disease and, she asserts,

morbid' fancies assailed him. On one occasion, a white rabbit strayed into the Wentworth Place garden and Dilke shot it. Keats was very much upset by the occurrence, declaring that the rabbit was Tom's spirit. No reasons nor arguments had the slightest effect upon him and he held to his opinion . . . earnestly . . . . (II, 120-121)

Knister takes an episode Lowell recounts and converts it into an evocative image that suggests not the deterioration but the growth of Keats's vision. Adding to the imaginative authenticity of Knister's image-vision of the episode is a letter of Keats; in a letter of 14 March 1819 Keats writes, "I go among the fields and catch a glimpse of a Stoat or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass--the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it" (II, 341). Lowell uses the rabbit episode to illustrate Keats's mental imbalance; Knister's version of the episode is an image revealing the mental agility of a man who can see the environment and imaginative possibilities with equal clarity.

Images of central importance in My Star Predominant fall into three related groups. The first group or wave of images presents Keats as an image-maker, as an artist who considers poetry to consist of the making of evocative images, and the source of these images is his immediate social and physical environment. This initial wave of images culminates in the image of Keats's delight at the sight of the "tide" created by the wind rippling a field of barley. The second



wave of images is connected with Tom, and suggests the growth of Keats's vision or the growth of his consciousness. This second wave culminates in the image of the rabbit upon Hampstead Heath, that Keats thinks might embody the spirit of Tom. The third wave of images consists of a movement toward the synthesis of the implications of the previous waves; the third and final wave of centrally important images in My Star Predominant suggests that the vision of the artist defies time, and therefore the personal vision of a Keats or a Dante lives forever.

While Keats is still in relatively good health, before his sickness exiles him to Italy, he speaks of Dante to Fanny:

He spread his cloak, first pulling from its pocket a tiny volume. Dante's Vision of Hell. "Let your eye shine upon this. Or no, I shall read." It was of Dante's and Virgil's entrance into the second circle, where Minos warned them, and they witnessed the punishment of carnal sinners, tossed about ceaselessly in the dark upon furious winds. Fanny's face became stiff as she listened.

"That canto pleases me more and more," Keats concluded. "Oh, not for the moral precept-- there are differences enough in the views held even by parsons, I'll be bound, on Dido, Helen, Paris, [and] Tristram. The world is disinterested in the end, when it has got so much beauty from them. (p. 208)

Keats's keen appreciation of Dante's Inferno is explicitly based on Keats's ability to see "so much beauty" in the work. However Fanny, who may be pleasant enough but is not apparently capable of extreme mental agility, cannot appreciate Dante's poetry to the extent that Keats does. Her face becomes "stiff" as she listens to Keats reading

Dante. From Keats's subsequent remark about "the moral precept" involved, it can be gathered that Fanny feels it decorous to show her disapproval of tales of adultery. Her displeasure highlights by contrast the deep pleasure Keats derives from reading Dante's Inferno.

Keats encouragingly urges Fanny, "listen to this on Francesco [sic] and Paolo--still together" (p. 208), and then reads from the Inferno,

"When of that smile we read,  
The wished smile, so rapturously kissed.  
By one so deep in love, then he, who ne'er  
From me shall separate, at once my lips  
All trembling kissed. The book and writer both  
Were love's purveyors. In its leaves that day  
We read no more." (p. 209)

Knister's use of Dante's image of Paolo and Francesca has a dual purpose. The image underlines Keats's allegiance to the belief in the discoverable beauty of all things, and is therefore also an oblique reminder of the expansion of Keats's personal vision. As well, the image from Dante's Inferno has the force of relating the artistic visions of Dante and Keats; it is from Dante's Vision of Hell that Keats reads, and Keats celebrates the vision informing Dante's work.

Knister furthers the association of Keats and Dante by having Keats relate a particular dream shortly after reading from Dante's Inferno, a dream Keats relates in a letter of 15 April 1819 (II, 352):

I had passed many days in a rather low state of mind, and one night I dreamed of being in that

region of Hell. It was one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had. I floated about the whirling atmosphere, as it is described, with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined as it seemed for an age-- and in the midst of all his [sic] cold and darkness I was warm--even flowery tree-tops sprang up, and we rested on them, sometimes with the lightness of a cloud, till the wind blew us away again. (p. 209)

As Keats admits, his dream--and it is a dream, rather than a nightmare--is based on Dante's version of that part of hell reserved for carnal sinners. Keats's dream is an imaginative inversion of Dante's hell. Keats notes the appearance of "flowery tree-tops" in his dream and it is with a flower--a rose--that Dante's Paradiso or version of heaven culminates.

But the appearance of "flowery tree-tops" in Keats's dream has another implication in the context of My Star Predominant. Keats explains to Fanny, "I learned that we must open our leaves like a flower and be passive and recreative and receptive" (p. 213). Keats is "passive" in dreaming rather than reading Dante's description of Paolo and Francesca. Keats is "recreative" as in his dream he recreates Dante's image of Paolo and Francesca, and changes Dante's cold, dark Inferno into a warm, flower-filled realm of sensuous delight. And Keats is "receptive" in being open to Dante's vision of belief in the "wisdom to see it needful to love the good and ill." Finally, Keats is therefore "passive and recreative and receptive" as a "flower" in seeing for himself what Dante demonstrates by sequence in his Divine Comedy--that the Inferno and the Paradiso are related.

Dante's description of a trip through hell, purgatory, and heaven ends with a heavenly rose and, similarly, Keats's recreation of Dante's hell is a heaven adorned by "flowery tree-tops." For both artists, according to Knister's presentation, heaven is an imaginative recreation of hell.

Keats uses the expression, "let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive" in a letter of 19 February 1818, and does not relate his dream of Dante until a letter of 15 April 1819. In My Star Predominant, Keats's dream and his "flower" comment occur within five pages of each other. Knister brings into sharper focus Keats's allegiance to imaginative recreation than chronological use of the Keats letters might permit.

The second wave of images in My Star Predominant is related to the third wave of images when Keats thinks, of the difference between Tom in the earlier stages of his fatal illness and Tom being gravely ill, "Purgatory blind! But this, then, was the Inferno. A sharp chill crossed his heart to think of the corresponding difference in Tom's health" (p. 152). In My Star Predominant, the second wave of central images consists of images associated with Tom, images that evoke the increasing power of Keats's vision, while the third wave of images consists of images associated with Dante's Divine Comedy, and invoke the power of any great artist's vision. While central images reflect the growth of Keats's personal vision, they are associated with an immediate relative, and when central images reflect the strength of artistic vision per se, they are associated with a great artist of

another era.

When Keats becomes seriously ill, friends care for him, and in these circumstances he remembers

that dream--floating about the whirling atmosphere with his lips joined to the lips of a beautiful figure, above and upon flowery tree-tops that sprung up in the cold darkness of the "second circle of sad Hell . . . where lovers need not tell their sorrows." And he remembered a spring day and a walk . . . across the Heath with Fanny, and a long talk of the future. No more. No more. The very word, he thought, was like a knell tolling him back to his lone self. "The second circle of sad Hell." Whatever circle it might be, he was here entering upon a new one in this oblivious and rattle-headed household, "where lovers assuredly need not tell their sorrows." (p. 277)

In fact, Keats refers to "that second circle of sad hell, / Where . . . lovers need not tell / Their sorrows" in the same letter as the one in which he recounts his dream of "Paulo and Franchesca [sic]" (II, 352). Knister presents Keats, discouraged by the dependence arising from illness, as sadly matching his previous vision of Dante's hell with his current predicament on earth. This memory of Keats's dream is not an imaginative recreation of part of Dante's poem, but a companion-piece to the earlier recreation. Knister presents Keats's memory of his dream in such a manner that visionary reality and daily reality are brought close together. The imagined recreation of Dante's work moves from the unconscious dream world to the conscious world of waking reality. What the second wave of images implies is

still true; the vision of Keats is still enlarging, but his poor physical health erodes his ability, as an artist, to express his vision.

Gravely ill, Keats goes to Italy, accompanied by his friend Severn. The last image of central importance in My Star Predominant occurs just before Keats dies:

Keats talked easily and calmly until he seemed to fall asleep at the sound of his own voice. Severn was bowed in the chair. In the night Keats woke, and all was dark. But Severn was there--why this agitation? Let him rest. There was a queer little glow where the candle had been, and a climbing hairlike ember. Would this change to a dream of Fanny's hair in the Inferno? Then suddenly the candle was alight. "Severn, Severn!" he cried out. "Here's a little fairy lamplighter--"

Severn was revealed rubbing his eyes. "I tied a thread from the bottom of the first candle to the wick of the other," he said. (p. 318)

About nine weeks before Keats dies (p. 318), and a page before My Star Predominant ends, Keats blends waking reality and dreaming reality and so fuses the two. The visionary power of Keats goes beyond consideration of everyday material reality, as is earlier demonstrated in his response to the rabbit on the Heath. Just before his death, Keats surpasses his previously demonstrated imaginary power; he is able to, in a sense, fuse the worlds of conscious reality and dream. There is reference to Dante's Inferno in this final image, and Dante's Inferno begins with the poet Dante waking to an imaginative and imagined world that is a creation of great visionary power. Knister's image of a tiny ember travelling on a thread from a

guttering candle to a fresh candle suggests the repeated transfer of the flame or spark of imaginative power from one artist to another. The dying Keats receives patient care from his friend Severn, who is a promising painter and who, while the two have been in Rome, has become acquainted with the sculptor Canova (pp. 302 and 304). The suggested passing of the torch of visionary power from one artist to another can be interpreted as involving the pairing of Dante and Keats, Keats and Severn, Canova and Severn, or Keats and Knister--or some or all of these possible pairings.

The final passage of the novel describes the end of the mortal Keats:

It was Friday, February twenty-third,  
half past four.

"Severn--I--lift me up, for I am dying. I shall die easy. Don't be frightened. Thank God it has come." The phlegm rattled in his throat and he could say no more. Severn lifted him upright in his arms. Until eleven he sat there, and save for a shiver when the phlegm threatened to choke him, did not move. Then he became more quiet, and quiet. (p. 319)

Although My Stan Predominant ends with the death of Keats, the last central image of the story suggests the immortality of the vision of Keats. The final passage of Knister's novel includes an implicit reference to Keats as an artist. Early in the story, Keats reads of his early work and evident promise, as described by Leigh Hunt:

Then followed a little niggling about the  
Chapman's Homer sonnet. But its conclusion,

Hunt claimed, was "equally powerful and quiet."  
Those words ran in his mind: powerful and quiet. (p. 54)

The final sentence of My Star Predominant reads, "Then he became more quiet, and quiet" (p. 319). Given the earlier double reference to the conclusion of a Keats poem being "powerful and quiet," the conclusion of the novel includes implicit reference to Keats as an artist. Even as Keats dies, there is an implicit reminder that the vision of the artist is immortal.

Images suggest the expansion of the visionary power of Keats the image-maker and, finally, the immortality of his vision. But central images are not the only source of structural unity in Knister's novel. My Star Predominant is divided into four sections of roughly equal length, and these divisions repeat the suggestions images evoke.

The four sections of My Star Predominant reflect the major feature of Knister's portrait of Keats: Keats as an increasingly visionary maker of immortal images. Each "Book" of My Star Predominant has its own epigraph, and title taken from the epigraph. Book I, "While We Are Laughing," and Book II, "Something Real in the World," are each prefaced by a quotation from a Keats letter, while Book III, "Too Many Tears for Lovers," and Book IV, "Yet, Do Not Grieve," are both prefaced by a quotation from a Keats poem. The sources for the epigraphs are first letters and then poems, so that the transition implies the development of Keats as an artist, or the growth of his visionary power, and also repeats the suggestion that the basis of Keats's art is his daily life.



The series composed of the openings of the four sections similarly evokes the growth of Keats as an artist, by charting the course of his writing career. Book I opens "on a day in May" (p. 9) with Keats waiting to meet Leigh Hunt, who has published a Keats poem less "than a month ago" (p. 10). Book II begins with a description of Keats's brothers helping him prepare to leave for the country where he hopes to be able to concentrate on writing poetry (p. 81). The third Book opens with Keats contemplating his treatment by the critics, and worrying about his having become, at least in the eyes of others, "attached to Hunt's fortunes" (p. 159). However, there is also mention of Keats's "effort to get rid of a sore throat" (p. 159). Book IV opens with Keats trying to reconcile his knowledge of being a victim of consumption with his strong desire to live and be a poet. He thinks that "His death would burn with a fiercer flame into the minds of men than his life had done" and, as he considers that his death might make his work of interest, he cannot help smiling "at this grotesque victory" (p. 251). The openings of the four sections of My Star Predominant collectively trace the writing career of Keats, recording his struggle to get his work published, his efforts to write, his attempt to achieve intellectual independence, and his final struggle to accept the fact that his writing career will quickly come to a close.

The title of My Star Predominant reflects the central concerns of the work. Knister's Keats uses the phrase "my star predominant" as a reference to his luck. When he finds Fanny Brawne at home and alone,

he declares "'All as though ordained for me. There is my star predominant!" (p. 237). But by the time he is in Italy, Keats uses forms of the expression in reference to his bad luck: "Before dawn he woke and watched the coming of the new day and cursed his star" (p. 316). It is also in Italy that Keats asks Severn, "'You think I don't know my unlucky star, and how it has been predominant from the first?'" (p. 314).

The phrase "my star predominant" (II, 572) occurs in a 30 November 1820 letter of Keats to Brown; a letter that, in Forman's 1931 edition of Keats's letters, appears as the last that Keats wrote. The context of the remark requires explanation. When Keats and Severn left England for Italy, bad weather conditions delayed their departure, and from 19 September to 21 October 1820 their ship, the "Maria Crowther," had to remain in the vicinity of the coast of England (Lowell, II, 468-483). During these weeks, the passengers of the "Maria Crowther" had opportunities to go ashore, and on two occasions Brown and Keats narrowly missed the chance to see each other for the last time. Keats deplores the ill-luck of these vanished opportunities when he writes, "There was my star predominant!" (II, p. 572). Insofar as Keats uses the phrase to refer to his luck, Knister's use of the phrase "my star predominant" parallels Keats's. Alternately, Knister's choice of title may refer to the ironic truth that Keats's "star" was indeed a propitious one, in the sense that Keats's work endures.

Knister devoted a good deal of time and energy to his novel about

Keats. While My Star Predominant has powerful moments, the novel may finally tell its reader at least as much about Knister as Keats. My Star Predominant stands as an interesting experiment in prose fiction, but perhaps Knister's own evaluation of the novel is reflected in the fact that, in his later works of longer prose fiction, he returned to subject matter, and particularly environments, that were familiar to him from his own immediate experience.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, pp. 215-216. Subsequent references to this thesis will be included in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Pacey, ed. and introd., The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove (Toronto and Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 283-4. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

<sup>3</sup> "My Star Predominant," TS, (car.), Box 4, Folders 2-3. 720 pp. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Dr. K.E. Garay, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario, 4 December 1984.

<sup>5</sup> "My Star Predominant," TS of 720 pages, Folders 1-13, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario, 12 December 1984.

<sup>7</sup> "My Star Predominant," TS of 349 pages, Folders 14-22, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario, 12 December 1984.

<sup>9</sup> "My Star Predominant," TS, and carbon copy and galleys. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Marion Helen Cobb, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario, 3 December 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Knister, My Star Predominant (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1934), p. 125. Subsequent references to this work will be included in the text.

12 Raymond Knister, "Foreword" to My Star Predominant, 7 May 1930. Folder 2, TS of one page. Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Canada.

13 Raymond Knister, "Notes on John Keats," Folders 23-25, 102 leaves. Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Canada. Further references to these notes will be found in the text.

14 John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1931), I, 8. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

15 Amy Lowell, John Keats (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), I, 214. Subsequent references to this biography will appear in the text.

16 John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life From 1816 to 1820 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1925), p. 6. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

17 Earle Vonard Weller, introd. and ed., Keats and Mary Tighe: The poems of Mary Tighe with parallel passages from the work of John Keats (New York: The Century Co., 1928), p. xxi. This volume was published under the aegis of the Modern Language Association of America. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

18 Personal interview with Myrtle Grace, 20 June 1982.

19 Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister: a Biographical Note," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 177.

20 Glenn Hughes, Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry (New York: The Humanities Press, 1960), p. 71.

21 Raymond Knister, "On Reading Aloud," The New Outlook, 27 October 1926, p. 14, col. 1.

22 Peter Jones, ed. and introd., Imagist Poetry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 17. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

23 Raymond Knister, "Katherine Mansfield," in The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint, No. 17, ed. and introd. by Peter Stevens (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 434.

24 Dorothy Livesay, "Knister's Stories," rev. of Selected Stories of Raymond Knister, ed. Michael Gnarowski, Canadian Literature, No. 62 (1974), p. 82.

25 Rev. of My Star Predominant, by Raymond Knister, Times Literary Supplement, 25 October 1934, p. 732.

26 Robert Ayre, "Biography Without Footnotes," rev. of My Star Predominant, by Raymond Knister, Saturday Night, 8 December 1934, p. 8.

27 "Keats and His Ailment," rev. of My Star Predominant, by Raymond Knister, Globe, 29 December 1934, p. 8.

28 John Keats, "Endymion: A Poetic Romance," in Keats Poetical Works, ed. H.W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 55.

## Chapter VIII "Peaches, Peaches": "Dreams of Summer Delights"

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

Marcus Waddington notes that Knister wrote the novella "Peaches, Peaches" between mid-December, 1931 and the spring of 1932.<sup>1</sup> Typed on white typing paper, which has the watermark "Abermill Bond,"<sup>2</sup> the transcript of the work is sixty-nine pages long. The extreme neatness of the text suggests that this may be the version of the novella that Knister submitted for publication. "Peaches, Peaches" is in The Raymond Knister Collection of Victoria University Library.<sup>3</sup>

The New York publishing house of Charles Scribner's Sons showed some interest in the novella. Knister was sent a 3 May 1932 letter from Scribner's, rejecting "Peaches, Peaches," but explaining that it had been "held for special consideration."<sup>4</sup> Although Scribner's rejected "Peaches, Peaches," Knister was later told that they would consider the work if it were expanded; a letter to Knister of 16 May 1932, from Scribner's, refers to the "possibilities for a novel" based on the novella:

We felt that while your atmosphere was good, there was perhaps too much stress on the technicalities of peach growing, and not

quite enough action and character development. If you are intending to rework the story anyway, we should advise doing it in the longer form, and with these points in mind. Our book department will be glad to consider it, although of course we cannot tell what the possibilities of acceptance will be.<sup>5</sup>

Knister drowned just over three months after the letter from Scribner's, suggesting the expansion of "Peaches, Peaches," was written. The irony of the response Knister received from Scribner's is that, while Knister had to reduce the length of My Star Predominant in order to make the work eligible for the 1931 Graphic contest, in 1932 Scribner's wanted Knister to expand "Peaches, Peaches" before considering it for publication. Scribner's published the work of Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Callaghan and, just before Knister's death, the possibility of Scribner's publishing Knister's work arose. It is interesting to speculate what Knister's literary reputation may have become had he not drowned at the age of thirty-three.

"Peaches, Peaches" eventually did get published; the novella is in the 1976 anthology of Knister's prose edited by Peter Stevens, The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Action

The protagonist of "Peaches, Peaches," Ed Burkin, is a young, unmarried man who works on his family's farm; his retired father has turned the operation of the family farm over to his older son, Amos. Ed works with Murray March, an agricultural college student, who Ed



eventually learns is a womanizer. The adults with whom Ed has daily contact are Amos, Amos's wife, Eleanor, and Murray. Over the course of a peach season, Ed's awareness of the liaison between Murray and Eleanor grows. The novella also describes the relationships of Ed and Murray to Florine and May, who work as seasonal help at the Burkin farm for the duration of the peach harvest. An inundation of peaches causes a frantic working pace at the Burkin farm, as Ed becomes increasingly conscious of the sexuality of relationships he witnesses and participates in. With the abrupt cessation of the peach harvest, dissolved relationships cause Ed, Eleanor, and May to reap a bitter harvest of regret.

### 3. Influences and Sources

"Peaches, Peaches" includes hints suggesting that D.H. Lawrence's 1921 novel, Women in Love, is a possible source for the novella. The name of Lawrence's protagonist is Rupert Birkin, Knister's protagonist is Ed Burkin, and both works concentrate on the subject of consciousness of sexuality. Toward the end of Women in Love, Birkin thinks how, confronted by misery, "the heart would break,"<sup>7</sup> and how regret can be enough "to break the heart" (p. 540); toward the end of "Peaches, Peaches," Burkin thinks of Murray as a "heartbreaker" (p. 57). In both works, what is enough to break the heart is knowledge of sexual relationships that are ultimately destructive.

While there is no direct evidence that Knister read Women in

Love, Knister was aware of Lawrence's work. In the opening paragraph of the essay "The Lost Gentleman," Knister writes, "I have just been reading D.H. Lawrence's The Lost Girl."<sup>8</sup> (Lawrence's 1920 novel, The Lost Girl, tells the story of an English nurse who finds herself repulsed by the lack of passion in English society; she eventually marries an Italian man, and leaves England for Italy.)

A possible reason for Knister's interest in Lawrence's work is the acute and detailed attention Lawrence pays to the natural world, while also devoting attention to the emotional lives of his characters. Lawrence's Women in Love assimilates attention to the natural world and exploration of emotional truths--Gerald's death in the snow of the Alps serves as an example--and the body of Knister's work suggests that the skilful treatment of these elements would win Knister's respect.

Both Women in Love and "Peaches, Peaches" deal with the ramifying implications of relationships, and both works make reference, if oblique, to the tree of knowledge. Rupert Birkin tells a secondary character, Hermione Roddice, "There is only one tree, there is only one fruit, in your mouth," and he elaborates, "in exasperation," "'The eternal apple'" (pp. 43-44). In the course of "Peaches, Peaches," the peach tree becomes tantamount to a tree of knowledge, symbolizing Burkin's growing consciousness of sexuality.

#### 4. Context

Knister wrote "Peaches, Peaches" in Ste. Anne de Bellevue,

where he lived from "mid-December 1931 to mid-June 1932" (Waddington, p. 189). Waddington adds that, during these "six months," Knister also wrote the short stories "Stuart's Wife," "The Judgement of her Peers," "A Brush With Quebec Law," and "Ten Percent." These works differ in tone and subject matter. "Stuart's Wife" deals with a love triangle.<sup>9</sup> "The Judgement of her Peers" describes the disappointment of a young writer who goes to a writers' conference.<sup>10</sup> "A Brush With Quebec Law" is a comic tale,<sup>11</sup> and "Ten Percent" is the story of a miser.<sup>12</sup> Despite the diversity of these works, a change of heart is important in each, and the most sophisticated treatment of this topic is in "Peaches, Peaches."

"Peaches, Peaches" has affinities with other Knister short stories. Michael Gnarowski, in his introduction to Selected Stories of Raymond Knister (1972), identifies three of Knister's stories as being "studies in initiation."<sup>13</sup> Gnarowski sees "Mist-Green Oats" as including the initiation of an "adolescent to maturity," "The Strawstack" as involving "an initiation into evil," and "The Loading" as presenting an initiation "into an understanding of nature" (pp. 13-15). According to Gnarowski, the protagonist of "Elaine," "an adolescent figure, is initiated via her own perception, however clouded or imperfect, of evil and sexuality" into "adult life" (p. 16). All the categories of initiation Gnarowski mentions arise, to some extent, in the "initiation" of Ed, with the possible exception of that to "nature." The very complexity of the "initiation" of Ed, as

well as Knister's use of a seven-part structure and the length of the published work (fifty pages), suggests that "Peaches, Peaches" can be considered a novella.

"Peaches, Peaches" does have affinities of theme and technique with certain of Knister's short stories, especially the 1922 "Grapes" (Waddington, p. 178) and "Cherry Time." All three titles refer to a fruit, and textual evidence repeatedly indicates that Knister chose his titles with care. Titles alone suggest the possibility of a family resemblance among these works. Peter Stevens describes "Grapes" as an

oblique story with a younger boy as the central character who watches an older, reserved man move tentatively towards two adolescent girls. All of them seem caught in a state of unconsciousness about their relations, and in general the unfocussed nature of this story leaves the reader somewhat dissatisfied, although Knister manages one superb scene depicting a time of tense togetherness in a water fight on a very hot day.<sup>14</sup>

"Peaches, Peaches," at least initially, also concerns

"unconsciousness about . . . relations." Another link between the works is the common significance of their titles. In "Grapes," an eccentric "hired man" has the habit of stealing into his employer's kitchen during the night and gorging himself with cream, a habit that even attempts at "hiding the milk-pans" from him cannot discourage.<sup>15</sup>

When grapes appear at the supper table, the hired man admits, "I never want to look at a grape again," and adds that he once "ate a six-quart basket" (p. 102) of grapes. His relations with people parallel his preferences in food; his employer jokingly remarks, to a

female character, that the hired hand can probably sate his attraction to a person in the same fashion as he eventually will overcome "his cream fever, like he got over his grape fever" (p. 105). In "Grapes," grapes represent the hired man's propensity toward transient but intense attraction, or his predisposition toward seasonal affinities. As in the case of "Peaches, Peaches," the title of "Grapes" draws attention to a symbol of changing consciousness, and especially consciousness of sexuality.

The title of "Cherry Time" has a similar function. Gilbert Gard and Blanche Worthyn meet and court near a cherry tree. In the course of the cherry season, Blanche's widower father discovers and subsequently grumbles about his daughter's relationship with Gilbert. Finally, Mr. Worthyn discovers the identity of Gilbert's mother, whom he "used to keep company with,"<sup>16</sup> and learns that she is now a widow. "Grapes," "Cherry Time," and "Peaches, Peaches" all--as the reference to "Time" in "Cherry Time" implies--deal with a changing consciousness of sexuality over a brief season, and all are set in rural Ontario.

##### 5. Critical Reception.

No study of "Peaches, Peaches" currently exists.

## II. "Peaches, Peaches"

In "Peaches, Peaches," the focus of attention is the protagonist's dawning consciousness of sexuality. The swiftly passing season of peaches is the setting for a phase or season in the life of the protagonist. Knister's division of the work into seven sections, use of evocative images of everyday life, presentation of setting, and symbolic use of water all contribute to the presentation of Ed Burkin's increasing consciousness of sexuality. As Waddington notes,

The consciousness of Ed Burkin provides a focus for events as he periodically reflects on them. Commonplace occurrences of no apparent significance acquire deeper meaning in the light of his growing understanding of himself and of the other characters.<sup>17</sup>

Waddington adds that the relationships formed during the harvest "simply disappear" "after the peach harvest" (pp. 227-228).

Relationships dissolve as peaches vanish; the dual seasons of harvest that occur in "Peaches, Peaches" enable the smooth assimilation of tangible and intangible realities in the work.

"Peaches, Peaches" opens,

The peach harvest was at its height on the Burkin farm, and everyone was so busy he didn't know what to do next, unless it was to tell someone else what should be done. There were five thousand young peach trees that had just come to growth for bearing the year before, a season of crop failure on account

of winter-killing. This year they were all bearing, and heavily. The early peaches made up nearly half of the orchards, and nearly all of these were ripening at the same time. The Yellow Saint John, a large, delicious red-cheeked peach almost the earliest freestone, was ready; and at the same time the Prolific, a smaller, redder peach, was starting and had to be gone over by the pickers at the beginning and end of that week. A score of things had to be looked after promptly and properly before the fruit was in packed, lidded, and stamped baskets. Then the marketing in itself was enough to drive a man wild in this year of heavy crops . . . . (pp. 8-9)

"Peaches, Peaches" begins with an evocation of time and place--the time is the "height" of the "peach harvest," the place "the Burkin farm." Subsequent references give a more precise sense of the geographic location of the Burkin farm. The farm is "by the southern tip of Lake Erie" (p. 57), not far from the "main Detroit-Buffalo highway" (p. 48), and about "fifteen miles" away there is a pier "on an inlet called Rond Eau" (p. 50). In this season of abundant peaches "Toronto is flooded with Niagara fruit" (p. 38), the Burkin peaches go to "a Collingwood firm and a Toronto firm" (p. 37), and are eventually shipped in "a refrigerator car to Winnipeg" (p. 38).

Knister gives details of the appearance, picking, packing, transporting, and marketing of peaches. The Elberta is "a long oblong large peach, yellow, but for a deep red cheek on one side" (p. 35). Hired peach pickers work at the Burkin farm; there are "sixteen girls with baskets and ladders straggling down the endless rows of trees" (p. 9), and "Every half hour or so" a "light wagon"

arrives to "pick up a load" (p. 10). The "heaped baskets brought from the field" are "poured . . . out and repacked," "flat lids" are nailed on the baskets, these baskets stacked in tiers (p. 11), and then taken away by truck (p. 12). Peaches are sold to "grocery stores in the city" (p. 19) but, with the market glutted, "getting rid" (p. 17) of them can be difficult.

The story effectively opens and closes with the peach harvest; the opening passage refers to it, and a description of the "general clearing-up" of the paraphernalia of the "peach season" (p. 56) occurs on the penultimate page. Thus the first and almost the last topic found in the novella is the peach harvest, and the terms of its description generate a strong sense of a season occurring and passing.

The protagonist of "Peaches, Peaches," Ed Burkin, participates in the fervid activity of the peach harvest; "'All stamped now?' Ed asked anxiously. 'Every basket has got to be stamped, to pass the inspector, you know'" (p. 11). Ed does more than voice a concern for the work done on the farm; as soon as the wagon bringing peaches from the orchard arrives at the barn, where the peaches are packed, he busies himself "seizing the full-heaped baskets, two in each hand, and carrying them to the back of the barn" (p. 11).

Ed works with Murray March, "a student at the agricultural college, paying part of his expenses by working on a farm"; Murray

was making up his mind for good that farming was no cinch, and that it would be as well to arrange for some white-collar job when he should



have graduated . . . . One season of this was plenty, and then some. (p. 10)

Murray's reaction to working on a farm where five thousand fruit trees are bearing fruit may be justifiable. But, Murray manifests self-interest early in the story, before there is mention of his name; his concern with self-interest identifies him. In the first section of the novella, Murray associates girls and peaches:

Murray March jumped down from the front of the wagon, warned the horses, and came around to the side, where he began pulling the baskets off and carrying them in, winking meaninglessly at Ed Burkin as he passed him among the women.

'How many more you got out in the orchard?' Ed asked him.

'How many what?' Murray returned with his slow grin. 'Girls?'

'No, baskets of peaches full,' said Ed particularly. (p. 12)

There is a hint of something dubious about Murray's willingness, even in the course of joking, to use the same term to refer to a commercial commodity and people. For Murray, the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the noun "peach" as slang for a "person or thing of superlative merit; specially attractive girl," is operative.

As a commodity, the Burkin farm peaches are of such abundance that they present difficulties. The Burkins must work with "hectic speed" (p. 10). Amos declares to Ed and Murray, "'we're buried in peaches'" (p. 43), and "'the market's glutted'" (p. 38). The peaches represent a problem in terms of space; "local markets" cannot "absorb the early peaches" (p. 19). The Burkins have "baskets of all sizes,"

but "fruit had been so cheap that everyone wanted eleven-quart baskets" (p. 39). Amos decides to "solve the problem" by sending peaches "to Winnipeg" in "a refrigerator car" (p. 38); the car holds "fifteen hundred baskets" (p. 40). As a commodity, peaches represent something that space must suddenly be found for, something defying preconceived notions. Murray puns on "peach," as referring to both commodity and person, and as a commodity the peaches that the Burkins harvest defy preconceived estimates. But Knister presents a "peach season" (p. 24) that explodes more than one sort of expectation. "Peaches, Peaches" presents the botanical "peach season" as a setting for Ed's growing knowledge of Murray's treatment of "peaches" of the human sort.

All seven parts of the novella contribute to the portrait of the relationship of Murray and Eleanor. The first section introduces Ed, Murray, and Eleanor. Murray makes his pun on the word "peaches" and, in the absence of Amos, Murray takes the "place" (p. 16) of Amos at the dinner table.

The second section of "Peaches, Peaches" is a swimming scene. Ed and Murray go swimming with Dave Blain, "another agricultural college man" (p. 20), who is working on a nearby farm for the summer. As they return from their swim in the lake, after having a desultory chat about "dames" (p. 21) in which all three participate, Dave raises the subject of being "back at the old school, and dating up the old girls. This thing of never seeing a woman all summer is all right maybe." Murray's subsequent silence is noticed by Dave and Ed, who glance at

him "in the dark, following in the narrow path overhung with peach boughs" (p. 22).

By the third section of the story, the association of peaches or peach trees with sexual knowledge ripens, and it is only now that Ed's opinion of Eleanor appears. He thinks of her as "a very grown-up sort of person, with whom he wouldn't have thought of being familiar" (p. 24). But very shortly afterwards, the reader learns that "Ed had never kept company with any girl steadily" (p. 24). Perhaps Ed's sense of Eleanor's aloofness or inaccessibility explains his thinking of her in terms of being remote from peaches; "You wouldn't see her out in the orchard or packing peaches, or standing on the market [sic]" (p. 26). In the third section, Ed considers sexuality and Eleanor in what might be described as contradictory terms. He sees her as divorced from the world of peaches and, if the peach tree is the tree of knowledge, Ed does not see her as being likely to partake of its fruit.

The fourth and central section of "Peaches, Peaches" gives fairly explicit clues about the nature of the relationship of Murray and Eleanor. Ed, arriving downstairs on a Sunday morning, sees

Eleanor . . . stirring the porridge over the natural-gas. She was wearing a kimono which she pulled together when she saw him. 'I thought it was Murray,' she said. (p. 28)

Ed's preoccupation with breakfast, like his preconceived idea of Eleanor, prevents his noticing anything unusual in her behaviour.

Yet the behaviour of Murray and Eleanor is such that Ed starts to

register something beyond his impatience for breakfast. He comments,

'What's keeping Murray, anyway . . . .

You and I better eat . . . .

'Sh--he's coming,' said Eleanor.

She began to take up the porridge.

'Well, it's a wonder.' What did it matter to her what he said about Murray?

You'd think he was company instead of hired help.

Murray came in . . . .

'Come on, Murray, I'm waiting like the pigs. Thought you'd never come. Eleanor didn't like it when I said I wondered whether you'd ever come. She seems to think you're company, instead of one of the family.'

Murray glanced at her before replying, as he pulled out his chair. 'I'll have to put on company manners, then, eh?' He seemed pleased with himself, as though he had been witty. (pp. 28-9)

Ed does not as yet fully see what the nature of the relationship between Murray and Eleanor is, but a seed of knowledge has been planted in his consciousness. Without seeming to know why, or even that he does so, he starts to watch the pair; "Ed saw that Murray glanced at Eleanor, but he needn't think she was different clay altogether" (p. 29).

In the fifth section of the story, Murray sees the picking of peaches as "raking them off" (p. 35) and "clawing them off" (p. 37). Murray's dual understanding of the term "peaches" lends his phraseology unfortunate connotations. Ed approaches understanding the nature of the relationship between Murray and Eleanor by the sixth section of the story. As Amos, Eleanor, Murray, and Ed have dinner, Ed feels

that their unanimity and good spirits were owing

to something hard to explain, unless it were the fact that Murray was to be with them longer than they had expected. When Eleanor insisted on his having a second piece of her fig pie with rich whipped cream top, it was with a girlish pretty air, almost a blush--or was it the heat of the stove? (p. 45)

Knister's image of Eleanor reveals her attitude toward Murray. At this point, knowledge of the liaison of Murray and Eleanor moves from beyond to at least the fringe of Ed's consciousness. By the sixth section of the novella, Ed can entertain the possibility that more exists between Murray and Eleanor than casual friendship, but he entertains the possibility only to reject it (p. 46).

Ed becomes fully conscious of the nature of the relationship of Murray and Eleanor only in the seventh and final section of "Peaches, Peaches." On the day of Murray's departure, Amos is absent because he has taken Murray "to the depot" (p. 56); Ed, busy with outdoor work, does not return to the house until the afternoon. He enters the house, and stumbles upon the knowledge that has eluded him:

He went into the kitchen and turned the tap [sic]. As he drank, the stillness of the house seemed broken by sobs shrill and abandoned, a tempest of grief. He tiptoed out as quickly as he could. Thunder! he thought, as he walked toward his team, Eleanor. What did that mean? She didn't like it because she couldn't go to town with the men?

. . . But she had said nothing to indicate such a wish. It must be that she was sorry that Murray had gone. Well he was a pleasant quiet fellow to have around, with his upright tallness, his blond head--but where was the farmer's wife who regretted having one less man to cook for? The cause of her grief was obvious, and it filled

Ed with something like awe. (p. 57)

Ed finally becomes conscious of the fact that the relationship of Murray and Eleanor is more serious than he had supposed. However, Ed's discovery is knowledge of a dark nature, rather than a pleasing enlightenment. And Ed's increasing awareness of the relationship of Murray and Eleanor parallels the presentation of quite another relationship. Knister also presents Ed as a participant in a potentially sexual relationship; again, as Ed arrives at understanding, his knowledge is as unanticipated as his knowledge of Eleanor's grief.

The differences between Ed and Murray become accentuated with the appearance of two girls. These girls, who are from nearby farms, are "a large stout fair girl of eighteen, and a dark, slighter one a little older" (p. 13). The "fat girl" is May Webster, the "older girl" Florine Gravel (p. 15). Ed immediately likes the latter: "the slim one. Though she was dark, Ed saw, her eyes were blue. She was French" (p. 15). Yet if Ed sees May and Florine as individuals--while noticing one of them more than the other--Murray perhaps sees them in more generic terms. When Ed returns, after driving the girls back to their homes at the end of a working day, Murray is quick to ask, "How did you get along with your two girl friends?" (p. 17).

May and Florine appear in the first section of the story; both have been hired to work--picking peaches--at the Burkin farm. In the second section, Dave, Murray, and Ed go swimming, and discuss women beneath "peach boughs" (p. 22). In the third section, as Ed and Florine work together--packing peaches--Florine's charms begin "to

have a particular allure" (p. 23) for Ed. But it is with the description of another attraction that the section closes. Murray and May both work in the peach orchard and, if Murray's attention is enough to cover May "with blushes," "when he was not paying her any attention, she would keep her eyes upon him as though he were the Prince of Wales" (p. 27). As this comment closes the third section, the attitude of May toward Murray receives emphasis.

In the fourth and central section, Murray shows a manipulative attitude toward others. He tells Ed that if Ed were to "take that little French girl out," Amos would be given "a scare"; "He'd think you wanted to get married" (p. 32). While Ed would like to have "an interesting relation with Florine" (p. 32), Murray finds May "kind of soft and silly and harmless" (p. 33).

The fifth section amplifies the differences between Ed and Murray in their respective approaches to Florine and May. Murray encounters May as he drives by a quiet "section of the orchard," and their conversation prompts him to think,

Why in thunder should she feel sentimental about him? He had merely treated her like the rest, goodnatured and decent, like a foreman over them. He might as well take a couple of jumps at once, since apparently he held kings. (p. 36)

If May looks upon Murray "as though he were the Prince of Wales" (p. 27), Murray looks upon a potential relationship with May in terms of a game in which he would be the winner--"he held kings" (p. 36). Knister's use, at this point, of an expression from card playing suggests that Murray is not above indulgence in petty games of power.

Murray feels that "time and place are . . . important" (p. 33) elements to consider in the matter of seduction.

The fifth section closes with a glimpse of Ed's very different feelings. As he reads in bed by the light of an "oil lamp," he remembers that he has not "seen Florine for a long time." He wonders if Murray might be "driving the girls home these nights," and thinks that, if Murray is not "interestèd in May," he "might" be "in Florine, 'my little girl,'" thought Ed sleepily, waking himself up enough to blow the light out" (p. 41). At this point Ed is literally and metaphorically in darkness, but his thoughts touch on the possibility that Murray is a seducer.

In the sixth section, Murray and Ed take May and Florine out on a Sunday drive and, after having dinner at May's house and taking Florine home, return to the Burkin farm. The drive takes the four beyond "the gravel of the peach orchards" (p. 49), and they drive back to May's house "through the peach country" (p. 50). As Murray and Ed return to the Burkin farm, Ed confides to Murray that, when the girls were with them, Florine's "arm was moving against me a little, or else it was the motion of the car" (p. 53). Later there is a hint that Murray uses his knowledge of the episode to amuse Eleanor; "Eleanor's voice was exclaiming over something, laughing musically, and her eyes were beaming at Murray. 'It must have been funny,' she said" (p. 54). Ed might be aware of Eleanor's response to what Murray has told her. The description of the Sunday outing suggests Ed's willingness to



become involved with Florine, but Eleanor's remark presumably subverts his anticipatory pleasure. ↵

In the final section, a heavy rain forces the peach pickers to take shelter in the barn, and Ed finds that the "smell of the damp wind," "the damp clothes," "the dry hay in the mow"--and "the peaches"--"mingled in a semi-aphrodisiac effect" (p. 54). Shortly afterward Ed notices Murray's absence, and then sees May "running from the direction of the house"; Ed then remembers that he has not seen May "from the time the load of pickers had come to the barn. Funny." May last appears in the novella "sitting glumly on a table, making no effort to pack" peaches (p. 55).

Murray departs with the close of the peach season. Ed has his suspicions about Murray, but they are still somewhat amorphous. The connection of Murray and the peach season with something amiss hovers on the fringe of Ed's consciousness:

Just about the time of the beginning of the peach season, when their extraordinary efforts should have made them more companionable, a reserve had seemed to spring up between them which they had belied with jocularities and manifestations of good-will. It was strange. It must have been those girls. (p. 56)

After Murray's departure, Ed hears Eleanor's "sobs shrill and abandoned, a tempest of grief" (p. 57), and he demonstrates that his knowledge of the human heart differs from Murray's. "Peaches, Peaches" concludes,

Although he wrote at once it was more than

a month before he got a letter from Murray. Their days had nothing in common now, and the letter had an awkward sound, a tone of reluctant duty in writing. He referred to constant letters from May Webster. Poor girl! He had written one to her which he supposed was a mistake, as it would make her keep on with her foolishness. Ed tore the letter up and did not answer it. What a hell of a life life was anyway. Somehow he had kept away from Florine, seeming to have lost interest in her. He felt like going to see May, just to cheer her up. Poor honest, homely, goodhearted May was going through endless dreary days in a lonely farmhouse stuck in the middle of fields, with nothing but that worthless heartbreaker to think about; cooped up with dreams of summer delights through a winter of loneliness and longing.

At any rate he would not make any pretences or raise any expectations in Florine, he thought. (p. 57)

Ed finally arrives at the knowledge that Murray is a "heartbreaker," and the process of his acquiring this knowledge affects him so profoundly that it alters his attitude and the course of his behaviour. Before Ed thinks of Murray as a "heartbreaker," he intends to "see Florine sometimes"; after Ed sees Murray as a "heartbreaker" he resolves not to "make any pretences or raise any expectations in Florine" (p. 57).

"Peaches, Peaches" evokes Ed's increasing consciousness of sexuality and the harmful consequences of sexual politics, and he learns to see the people around him in the revealing light of brief but telling sights and sounds--the discussion of sex beneath peach boughs, Eleanor serving fig pie, her final cries of grief, and so on. Knister's images evoke truths of Ed's "ordinary" life, but these are

truths that a photographic realism cannot convey, and an image in the novella calls particular attention to the limits of a verisimilitude of surfaces or appearances. On the day of the outing of Ed, Murray, Florine, and May, on the way back from Rond Eau, the four stop at May's family's farm, where her father photographs the four:

May was beaming brightly enough to ruin the negative; Murray had adopted an easy hands-in-pocket pose of a well-dressed-young-man-with-his-hat-on. Ed held his hands down stiffly at his sides, and tried to outstare the low sun, while Florine was smiling with pursed lips, leaning forward a little, her head bent a little with an intimate look. (p. 51)

After reading Knister's evocation of the four characters photographed, as presented over the course of the novella, their photographed appearances are relatively frozen and false: "A camera gives limited representations, if empirically accurate ones. Knister's image of what the camera captures suggests that photography--and by extension photographic realism--gives an accurate impression of what it captures, but that what it captures is only part of a larger and much more complex reality or picture. As George Levine remarks in his 1981 study, The Realistic Imagination, for Joseph Conrad,

The reality he finds, or intimates, is a world in which the surfaces with which realism was preoccupied and which it largely tried to take as the reality itself merely disguise the truth, or repress it.<sup>18</sup>

For Knister, as Levine suggests of Conrad, a verisimilitude of "surfaces" cannot convey in full the discoverable "truth" of "reality."

Knister's use of intensely evocative images of everyday life is a fictional strategy that enables acknowledgement of intangible realities, without denial of the realities that photographic realism recognizes. The image of the "photograph" of Ed, Murray, Florine, and May suggests the limitations of a photographic approach in fiction. This image of Knister's, which appears in one of the last works he wrote, helps explain why Knister made central use of evocative images of ordinary life: such images enable the acknowledgement of the realities that appearances may suggest, but do not necessarily reveal. In the second section of "Peaches, Peaches," when Ed, Murray, and Dave go swimming, during the others' chat about women and sex, Murray remains "silent," causing the others to look "at him in the dark, following in the narrow path overhung with peach boughs" (p. 22). This image reveals more about the three than any photograph could, as Knister's later image of a photograph demonstrates.

In each of the seven sections of the novella, there is mention of water, and perhaps this transparent element plays such an important symbolic role in the novella precisely because water demonstrates the validity of the proposition that the realities of surfaces are not the only existing realities. Waddington points out that Knister wrote "Grapes" in early 1922, or about a decade before writing "Peaches, Peaches," and in "Grapes" Knister already uses water as a symbol of intangible reality. The "water fight" (p. xxiii) Stevens praises ends with James, the hired man, dunking one of his employer's youthful nieces in "the stable trough." The employer's son, who

narrates the story as a tale of his youth, recalls his father commenting to James, "'Some baptizing!'" and "'You're quite a ladies' man!'" (p. 110). Thus water becomes associated with initiation into an awareness of psycho-sexual realities.

Knister uses water in a generically similar way in "Peaches, Peaches." In the first section, after Florine and May join the Burkins for supper, the "haze of dusk" approaches, "and between distant trees an expanse of Lake Erie lay flat and slate-blue" (p. 16). In the second section Ed, Murray, and Dave go swimming "in the lake" (p. 20) and, as their talk turns to the subject of "women" met at "school," Dave volunteers, "'Murray and I would help the sophomores at initiation'" (p. 22). Ed is at an age of initiation, for "Ed, who had lived within a mile of the lake all his life, had just last winter learned to swim" (p. 20). Despite his attraction to Florine, in the third section Ed reminds himself "not to get into deep water" (p. 24).

The fourth and central section hints at an association of water with sexuality, and peaches with sexual hypocrisy. Ed reads

an entertaining article on life in the South Seas. It seemed that nothing could be more enjoyable nor untrammelled. But civilization was coming to ruin the integrity of the people and their manners, leading them to add new and dangerous vices to those traditional with them. It was a hell of a world. (p. 28)

Only two pages later, the "South Seas" way of life, which is undergoing introduction to the "vices" of "civilization," comes into contrast with Ed's social milieu. Eleanor dislikes having it "said"

that the Burkins sell "peaches on Sunday. That was one of the chief demarcations of virtue and vice in the community" (p. 30). Perhaps one of the "vices" being introduced to "South Seas" life is the "vice" of behaving according to what people might "say," rather than acting according to conscience. Ed's appreciation of the "Seas" in the central section of the novella hints at his movement toward a consciousness of sexuality, as earlier in the novella water becomes associated with knowledge of sexuality.

The association of water with sexuality becomes especially pronounced in the last three sections of the novella. In the fifth section, the encounter of Murray and May occurs in "a section of the orchard . . . along a stream which was screened by trees and thick branches of sumach" (p. 36). The sixth section describes the outing of Ed, Murray, Florine, and May. They visit the lake, and go beyond "peach country" (p. 50). May's attraction to Murray might explain her repeatedly expressing a wish to go swimming (pp. 48 and 49). At the lake a striking scene confronts the four:

people were looking absorbedly into the water, and what they saw was a man swimming on his back under water. It was less than six feet to the sandy bottom. He was moving his joints like a frog's, and his eyes were open. May turned away and clung to Murray's arm. . . . the primary attraction was a large launch which could be heard thrumming half a dozen miles down the Eau. 'Air-plane engine . . . Liberty motor,' a young boy was saying. (p. 50)

The visit of the four to the lake is in the second-last section of "Peaches, Peaches," and the scene in which Ed, Murray, and Dave go

swimming in the lake is in the second section. But, by the time of the visit to the lake in section six, Ed's "initiation" into psychosexual knowledge has proceeded. Knister's image of "a man swimming . . . under water" brings into focus Ed's dawning consciousness of sexuality; in the earlier scene, Ed "stood up and spluttered, snorted the water out of his nostrils, and spit" (p. 20) after a wave immerses him. By the sixth section Ed's nascent consciousness makes him hesitate to "spoil" the "occasion," on which the four are "immaculately dressed," and in "an immaculate car" (p. 48), by swimming.

"Peaches, Peaches" closes with the end of a peach season and a season or phase in the life of Ed Burkin. The series of references to water, a series that culminates in an evocative image of "under water" swimming, has more to do with Ed's psychological "season" than the peach season. However, in the final section of the novella, Knister brings together references to peaches and water, fusing the two "seasons" "Peaches, Peaches" covers. Toward the close of the work, "The flood of peaches stopped as though at the turning of a tap" (p. 56). Ed's discovery of Eleanor's grief at Murray's departure becomes a watery affair:

He went into the kitchen and turned the tap [sic].  
As he drank, the stillness of the house seemed  
broken by sobs shrill and abandoned, a tempest  
of grief. He tiptoed out as quickly as he  
could. Thunder! he thought . . . . (p. 57)

The description of Ed's discovery of Eleanor's grief includes terms

associated with water: "tap," "drank," "tempest." Ed here thinks "Thunder," and at the opening of the final section heavy rain ushers in the day of his beginning to discern May's grief at Murray's departure (p. 54). The "peach season" (p. 54), and a season in Ed's life, end with his discoveries that are water-related, a dual season that fades into "A long, long fall until the end of November, there by the southern tip of Lake Erie" (p. 57). He finally is conscious enough of the seductive world of "water" to imagine May's season of "dreams of summer delights through a winter of loneliness and longing" (p. 57).

The title of "Peaches, Peaches" applies to the work in various ways. At the end of the fourth and central section, Amos, returned from the peach orchard, explains that the late peaches are ripening, and gives a late peach to Ed, and one to Murray. Amos's gesture may imply that the attitude behind Murray's pun on the word "peach" will be fulfilled in time, or that Murray's treatment of person as commodity will be put into practice, just as Ed's understanding of Murray's outlook will arise. The end of the central section introduces a second wave of botanical ripening and peach picking. Perhaps "Peaches, Peaches" presents two waves of botanical ripening, because the work finally evokes two seasons of ripening; the ripening of peaches and the ripening of Ed's consciousness. In "Peaches, Peaches," "dreams of summer delights" are as real and as ephemeral as the brief peach season.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister: A Biographical Note," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. and introd. David Annason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> Letter received from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario, 12 December 1984.

<sup>3</sup> "Peaches, Peaches," TS of 69 pages, Folders 68-69, The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Scribner's Sons, Letter to Raymond Knister, 3 May 1932, The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Scribner's Sons, Letter to Raymond Knister, 16 May 1932, The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Knister, "Peaches, Peaches," in The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint, No. 17, ed. and introd. Peter Stevens (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 8-57. Subsequent references to this novella will appear in the text.

<sup>7</sup> D.H. Lawrence, Women in Love (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 538. Further references to this edition will be included in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Knister, "The Lost Gentleman," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, p. 149.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Knister, "Stuart's Wife," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, pp. 27-38.

<sup>10</sup> "The Judgement of her Peers," TS, Box 5. 15 p. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Knister, "A Brush With Quebec Law," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, pp. 142-145.

12 "Ten Percent," TS, Box 6. 6 p. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

13 Michael Gnarowski, introd., Selected Stories of Raymond Knister, by Raymond Knister, (Ottawa: Univ. of Ottawa Press, 1972). p. 13. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

14 Peter Stevens, ed. and introd., The First Day of Spring: Stories and Other Prose by Raymond Knister, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint, No. 17 (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. xxiii.

15 Raymond Knister, "Grapes," in The First Day of Spring, pp. 99-100. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

16 Raymond Knister, "Cherry Time," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, p. 54.

17 Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 228. Subsequent references to this thesis will appear in the text.

18 George Levine, The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction From 'Frankenstein' to 'Lady Chatterley' (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 318.

## Chapter IX "Soil in Smoke": Grounds for Crops and Visions

### I. The Background

#### 1. Dates of Composition and the Text

"Soil in Smoke" is Knister's last novel. Marcus Waddington notes that, "in 1931 and 1932 Knister had been reworking his first novel, 'Group Portrait,' which he now entitled 'Soil in Smoke.'"<sup>1</sup> A rough copy and a neat copy of "Soil in Smoke" are among Knister's papers.

The rough copy of "Soil in Smoke," a typescript of two hundred and seventy-eight pages, became available in January, 1984. This version was typed on paper of different watermarks: "Progress Bond," "Rockbarnes Bond" and "Rockwell Bond."<sup>2</sup> The typescript is easy to read, has double spacing, and includes occasional handwritten revisions of from one, or a few words, to a paragraph in length. A number of titles appear in the typescript, and these titles reveal the evolution of the final title, "Soil in Smoke." The typed title "Soil for Smoke" appears on the first page of the typescript, as do two handwritten titles: "Clapboards and Paint" appears above the typed title, and "Beginning of the End" appears to the left of the typed title. Five other titles dominate blocks of the text. "Family Group" is the title on pages two to seventy-six, although pages sixty-eight, sixty-nine and seventy bear the typed title "Group Portrait." Pages seventy-

seven to eighty-four bear the title "Family Album." "Revolt at the Border" is the title on pages eighty-five to one hundred and thirty-seven--with the variation in title, on pages one hundred and fifteen to one hundred and seventeen, of "Robina at the Border." The alternatively used titles "Soil to Smoke" and "Soil for Smoke" predominate in the remainder of the typescript, or the latter half of the novel. Even in the second half of the typescript, further variation in title occurs; the typed titles, "Youth Whirls the Dust" and "Soil for Smoke," appear side by side from page one hundred and seventy-six to page one hundred and eighty-four. The last fifty-five pages of the typescript all bear the title "Soil to Smoke." This typescript, the rough copy of "Soil in Smoke," is among The Raymond Knister Papers at McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.<sup>3</sup>

The neat copy of "Soil in Smoke" is a typescript of three hundred pages. This typescript has some variation in title, but all the titles that appear are typed, and there are fewer changes in title than in the rough copy of the novel. Most of the pages bear either the title "Soil in Smoke" or "Soil to Smoke." One title usually runs for several pages, although a large block of the text--pages sixty-three to one hundred and forty-six--carries the title "Soil to Smoke." Three other titles make brief appearances: "Family Group" (p. 61), "Family Group: Soil to Smoke" (p. 62), and "Soil for Smoke" (pp. 43-46 and p. 199). As the title "Soil in Smoke" appears on the title page, is used frequently in the work, and is the title used continuously for the final pages of the novel (pp. 283-300), the

work will be referred to as "Soil in Smoke."

Despite the variant titles of this typescript, there is evidence that this text may be the one Knister submitted for publication. "Soil in Smoke" is on typing paper bearing the watermark "Abermill Bond,"<sup>4</sup> has double spacing, and is exceedingly neat. The title page and the final page of the text bear the typed notation, "Raymond Knister, / Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, / Canada." The presence and repetition of this notation add to the evidence that this text may have been the one Knister submitted for publication. "Soil in Smoke" is in The Knister Collection of Victoria University Library.<sup>5</sup> Two carbon copies of "Soil in Smoke" are among The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.<sup>6</sup>

Knister submitted his last novel for publication. In a letter of 11 August 1932 rejecting the work, Jonathan Cape comments to Knister that "Soil in Smoke" may not have the makings of a commercial success, but "It is a very intimate and detailed picture of the life of a typical farming family in Western Ontario, and certainly deserves to find an audience."<sup>7</sup> Whether or not Knister ever read Cape's letter is a moot question, as Knister drowned on August 29, 1932.<sup>8</sup> "Soil in Smoke" remains unpublished. Were the novel to be published, there would be readily available one of the most powerful works of an outstanding Canadian writer of the twenties, and an enduring fictional account of the tobacco-raising life of the era.

## 2. The Action

"Soil in Smoke" focuses on Roland, Mil, and Robina (or Roby) Nebblin, three of the older children of the Nebblin family. The Nebblins raise tobacco, an occupation of little interest to either Mil or Robina. However, Mil and Robina share an interest in pleasure-seeking, and a concomitant desire to escape to the city. The pursuit of these interests ultimately results in Mil's contraction of venereal disease and the rekindling of Robina's kleptomania. The minor characters of the novel either reflect the worldview Mil and Robina share, or, in contrast, find satisfaction in their work. Outlook divides the novel's cast of characters, who either appreciate the countryside or long to leave for the city, and who either yearn for pleasure in escape from daily life or find pleasure in everyday life. Mil, Robina, Robina's boyfriend Stanley McCord, and his cousin, Celia Hurst, Mil's girlfriend, prefer the speed of cars, the zest of dancing, and promiscuous sexual seduction to the everyday working life from which the farm worker, Ben, and the oldest Nebblin son, Roland, derive pleasure.

## 3. Influences and Sources

The impulse to reflect everyday life, that marks Knister's fiction from the first, remains a vital element in "Soil in Smoke." As far as the regionalism of the work goes, the possible sources

remain the same as those for the earlier version of the novel, "Group Portrait." Knister encountered, in the work of Anton Chekhov and Sherwood Anderson, the use of local conditions as a vital setting in which to explore psychological and emotional realities (as discussed in chapter two). However, intangible realities become more important in "Soil in Smoke" than in "Group Portrait," and such a shift recalls Knister's overt interest in the work of nineteenth-century American romance writers at the time of writing White Narcissus. "Soil in Smoke," while based on "Group Portrait," bears a family resemblance to White Narcissus in making central the polarity between the visions held by different groups of characters. The polarity between those who cherish ordinary life and those who try to escape from everyday life, if important in "Group Portrait," becomes more intense in "Soil in Smoke."

#### 4. Context

"Soil in Smoke" is a work of Knister's last years; the typescript of the novel gives Knister's address as Ste. Anne de Bellevue, and Knister lived in Ste. Anne de Bellevue from the December of 1931 until the June of 1932.<sup>9</sup> Marcus Waddington notes that, in a letter of 20 August 1932 thought to be "the last he ever wrote," Knister comments to Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press,

Canada does move people to exalted and justifiable eloquence. I prefer it in the quietness of true feeling, usually transmuted into the impersonality of valid art. (Waddington, p. 229)

"Soil in Smoke" strikes roots deep into the region of Canada Knister was most familiar with; Knister "transmutes" his knowledge into the characters and environment of "Soil in Smoke." Precisely how Knister accomplished this "transmutation" has much to do with his varied interests in the last years of his life. Local geography received Knister's attention, as did the question of presenting the continuity of tangible and intangible realities in his fiction. "Soil in Smoke" literally begins with the ground of reality, or the land, and proceeds to explore the different visions of those who share the same circumstances of material reality.

Between 1931 and 1933, Knister had three articles dealing with Southwestern Ontario geography and agriculture published. All three reveal Knister's skill in conveying simultaneously the material realities of place and the intangible influences of place.

Knister's "Long Point, Lake Erie" appeared in the January issue of The Canadian Geographical Journal in 1931. Attention to physical place becomes the basis for speculation about the influence of place:

Long Point lighthouse rises from four feet above lake level, 102 feet, an octagon, reinforced concrete structure. The light is 100,000 candle-power, and the costly lens was made in England. A white flash is given every eight seconds. One pictures lonely persons pacing the sand of the beach, looking at this light which can never go out of their minds, and amusing themselves by counting the steps they take between each eight-second flash.<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not Knister read Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel, To the Lighthouse, which his "pacing . . . of the beach" description recalls,



Knister's acute sense of the influence of environment emerges from his description. To seize the environment with imagination is to recognize both murderous and paradisaal possibilities; Knister refers to "the north shore of the Point, with its wild rice and lily-pads-- a paradise for ducks and hunters" (p. 73). Knister also relates the case of the "private detective" who was hired to stop the practise of "poaching . . . for ducks, deer and everything the place provided"-- "Two stakes mark the spot where he was shot down" (p. 75). The environment as an objective reality coexists with the subjective truths, paradisaal or homicidal, that man sees in his environment.

Knister's 1932 article, "Farthest South in Canada's Domain," describes a trip to Pelee Island. In this article, which appeared in the 5 March 1932 issue of Saturday Night, Knister uses techniques that also appear in "Soil in Smoke." The land is the ground of realities discussed:

The beach was wide, perhaps fifty yards, smooth yellow sand. This girdle of sand fascinated me, since except for its beaches the whole island proved to be a heavy dark loam.<sup>11</sup>

As in Knister's last novel, the fertility of the earth has metaphorical as well as literal meaning. There is an almost-fabled fertility to the land, especially when it comes to the raising of grapes: "tons" of grapes can be harvested per "acre." An elderly local inhabitant tells Knister, "It is a wonderful place"--where one can "'Raise anything: peaches, nectarines, grapes; they are trying

hemp now!" (p. 2)-- and a place or land of wonder is exactly what Knister evokes. A land of wondrous fertility recalls the biblical promised land, which abundant grapes symbolize (Num. 13.23). As in his description of the Long Point lighthouse, Knister's oblique allusions to the promised land in discussing Pelee Island demonstrate Knister's penchant for discovering continuities between tangible and intangible realities.

In "Pelee Island," an article published in the June, 1933 issue of the Canadian Geographical Journal, Knister again presents the island as being a land of almost fabled fertility, but a new stress on the raising of tobacco emerges. Grapes again receive mention as a particularly abundant crop: "when Pelee got into its stride as a raiser of grapes, the crop ran into four and five tons to the acre."<sup>12</sup> Yet Knister also refers to "the risk taken in the continual large production of tobacco," although "tobacco is the main product of the island." Only the variety of tobacco called "Burley" can be grown on the island, a variety which "would soon wear out the strongest land." Farmers either "not . . . careful or fortunate have lost in the years of low price more than enough to make up for their earnings in the good years" (pp. 301-302).

Knister's treatment of growing tobacco is parallel in "Pelee Island" and "Soil in Smoke." Tobacco becomes a crop associated with ambiguity; tobacco might make a farmer wealthy, but can "wear out the strongest land," and may also rob the farmer of the gain his toil might lead him to expect. (Knister himself smoked cigarettes. Not

the ultimate use of the tobacco crop comes into question, but the growing of tobacco becomes associated with both the richness of fertility or possibility and the disappointment of unfulfilled promise.) Knister presents tobacco as a crop representing the inherent possibilities of both success and failure. In "Pelee Island," the land represents the richness of paradisaical possibility only if man envisions his environment as a promised land. Knister's articles about different locations and crops in Southwestern Ontario show his interest in the land as a physical reality, but also reveal his sense of continuity between physical and visionary reality.

The two page, typewritten document, "Via Faust," also demonstrates Knister's interest in the continuity between tangible and intangible realities at the time of writing "Soil in Smoke." Waddington describes "Via Faust" as Knister's "outline for a novel he was planning, and quite possibly the last thing he wrote" (p. 231). "Via Faust" delineates four stages in the life of a writer. The outline opens, "Theme, to Faust and back. Begin with life out of the soil. Similar to 'Mist Green Oats.'" (Knister's short story, "Mist-Green Oats," was published while he was working on "Group Portrait," the early version of "Soil in Smoke.") In the second stage, the protagonist writes "novels, realistic," and his primary concern is "personal relations." The third stage has the protagonist notice that great authors move "away from realism" and "to creation . . . cerebral more than instinctive." In the final stage the protagonist "Returns once more to earth, the instinctive."<sup>13</sup> The course of the

literary development of Knister's protagonist describes a circle or loop, beginning and ending with the "instinctive." Perhaps the final recognition of the "instinctive" or the "earth" means that the protagonist has a final recognition of the richness of everyday life, as embodied by the "earth" or his physical environment. His temporary detachment from material reality presumably teaches him the extent to which everyday reality involves invisible and visionary matters.

#### 5. Critical Reception

No study of "Soil in Smoke" currently exists.

#### II. "Soil in Smoke"

"Soil in Smoke" gives attention to the three eldest Nebblin children: Roland, Mil, and Robina. These three see the everyday life of the countryside differently, and also differ in their ideas of what life, at its best, consists of, or what an earthly paradise means. Roland prefers to work the land, Mil chases sensual pleasure and material delight, and Mil's favoured pursuits both attract and repel Robina. In the course of the novel, the celebration of the commonplace becomes the opposite of diseased, if not dangerous, delusion. Exotic forms of pleasure prove to be dangerous delights, and this points to a converse idea--the intense sense of celebrating

the everyday that is the culminating vision of Knister's longer prose fiction.

"Soil in Smoke" opens,

Over the tangle of hay in which he reclined, rocking as the wagon wheels found depressions, Ben Frick watched the shadowed lake swing from sight. The farms on either hand lay smoothly along the bank, sloping with little undulation from a parallel ridge a mile or so back from Lake Erie. They were gravel at the ridge, sometimes coarse and stony, but tending to mild uplands of yellow sand halfway back. This was their surface, and it made the difference from the rest of Western Ontario; a farmer would not need to tell you. But the subsoil is important too, and in some places it was clay, in some quicksand; while below the subsoil there might be ash-coloured flaky clay like that seen when you had climbed down the steep bank to the water. (p. 1)

Ben thinks of further work to do for the farmer who employs him, but Ben's thought cannot distract him from the pleasure of viewing the landscape:

The farmhand looked back. It was not blue only, the pale, ripped, shot-silk eastern levels, though these were overwhelming enough, when you got down on the sand before the lake and looked up across, along them. There was another sunset there, blue-green with the blue, pearl, old-rose fire. (p. 2)

The novel begins by presenting the landscape as having three sorts of appeal: the lake offers the pleasure of swimming on a hot day, farms offer fertility or utility, and a gorgeous sunset offers aesthetic appeal (pp. 1-2). In revealing the landscape through the eyes of the

farmhand, Ben, Knister introduces an association between the vision of the earth as offering a rich and varied grandeur, if not paradisaical possibilities, and the person who tills the earth, the farmhand or farmer. This association assumes even more importance as the initial association made in the novel.

Ben arrives at the farm where he works to find Mil Nebblin--who has just finished fixing an engine (p. 3). Mil is a "short shaven fellow" (p. 3) in Ben's eyes. As Ben approaches his employer, the farmer Rendall, and Mil, the scene he encounters is as well the reader's introduction to Mil:

Mil Nebblin was leaning forward, sitting on a beam in mid-air, while the old fellow tugged with his fork at a big slingful of hay mounded in the center of the mow.

"--just do that little thing, but I daresn't. You know. But anyway, hell, there's nothing to getting married. "Hello Ben Frick!" His deeply confidential tone changed.

"Hello yourself and see how you like it!"

Milton Nebblin was a brown-haired young man of twenty-five, short, not thickset, but built so neatly he was powerful, could lift anything, if he took the notion. (p. 4)

Contrasts between Ben and Mil emerge early in the novel. Mil recognizes their differences, for he changes his "tone" with Ben's entrance, presumably because he regards Ben as an intruder.

Mil, who would rather tinker with an engine than do farm work, has a great deal of interest in cars. Driving and dancing attract him (p. 5). He spends his energy in the pursuit of sensual delights and, unlike Ben, does not balance pleasure and work. Mil works for

short periods, spends his money in an attempt to purchase pleasure, and returns to work when financial need forces him to do so.

Ben can accept or balance work and pleasure, and early in the novel derives pleasure from the beach and the lake. But the natural beach that draws Ben stands in contrast to the artificial version of the beach that attracts Mil, who enjoys visiting the dance pavilion at the beach. Mil goes to "Haley Bluffs," where the beach is only something briefly glimpsed between a pavilion and "a huge semicircle of cars parked about the pavilion" (p. 24). It is during this scene at the dance pavilion that Mil joins the ranks of Knister's obsessed characters; Mil has

eyes only for the dancing and the floor. A lightness and quickness had come into his blood, an obsession like alarm, that would not let him think. Of course he could be offhand and modestly unswaggering, inconspicuously at ease as any of these dressy bucks who had the advantage of fine clothes and fine cars and well-rested bones. But all the same an insensate eagerness filled him, and without knowing it he was ready for love or battle. What he was not ready for was to stand by watching others dance, while the orchestra poured such wildness into him. Would there be anyone he didn't know he could pick up? He couldn't think of any he knew he was keen about: slow small town skirts. There were some good-looking ones in pairs and groups, and it took nerve to tackle them alone: Where was the girl alone, looking for him? (p. 25)

Knister describes Mil as being unconsciously "ready for love or battle." Mil might be an artist manqué, for his "obsession" with physical expression may be a substitute for another sort of expression.

Before he finds a dance partner, he feels "still out of things. These bright-coloured alien faces took on the beauty of the unattainable" (p. 26). Like Hawthorne, James, and Knister, Mil has an impulse to seize the unseizable. But, for Mil, getting things down on paper does not have the allure of getting a partner to dance with.

At the dance, a "tall girl . . . caught Mil's eye." He thinks her "a peach," and considers her to have "honey-coloured hair." Whereas the earth holds the promise of an earthly paradise, if seen from the viewpoint of Ben, it is the promise of a casual seduction that means potential paradise for Mil. Early in the story there are references to the fact that Mil is short and, at the dance, the girl on whom he fixes his attention is "perhaps taller than himself" (pp. 27-28). The dialogue between Mil and his partner as they dance implies that the physical shortness of Mil may indicate a metaphorical short-sightedness or impairment of vision. As Mil and the girl begin to dance, he appreciates

the way she turned, on the floor, and put up her arms. Liked it--her? His luck was dizzying. She was the swellest girl he had ever put his arms about. But who was she?

"My name's Nebblin, Milton Nebblin."

"Milton John, Paradise Regained or Lost?"

"Say, paradise, you said it. But I didn't say my name was John. My first name's Milton."

She didn't care to talk, it seemed. (p. 28)

The girl refers to two of Milton's poems, but Mil is not aware of her literary allusions. His obliviousness is less a comment on his literary background than a characterization of his vision. If



Milton Nebblin is quite unaware of John Milton's poetry, he is unaware of Milton's detailed depiction of an earthly paradise and its diabolical corruption. The point is that Mil Nebblin is unaware of the difference between the nature of an earthly paradise and exile from such a paradise.

For all the intent energy that Mil brings to his pursuit of pleasure, he discovers not paradise on earth, but his contraction of venereal disease (pp. 262-263). Mil's obsessive pursuit of sensual delight results in physical illness and, by extension, he has a diseased or impaired vision. His contempt for life on the farm--he frequently flees to the city in pursuit of pleasure--overlooks the presence of extraordinary beauty at the Nebblin farm.

Mil's younger brothers, Frank and Herbie, do not share Mil's disdain for farm life. A scene describes Frank and Herbie's evening expedition to the tobacco barn, to "catch those chickens that are roosting in the tobacco" (p. 72). As Frank climbs in the barn in order to retrieve chickens, he sees Herbie below, "standing in the darkness pined with sudden rays of light" (p. 74) from their lantern. Frank retrieves chickens, and with Herbie's help puts them in a crate. As Frank can perceive the beauty of Herbie in the light of the lantern, so Herbie can perceive the extraordinary beauty of the ordinary as it is visible in the light of the lantern:

While Frank clambered up again Herbie held the last fowl in his hand. It was a beautiful Plymouth Rock cockerel. As he held it the bird twisted its head to look up in his face across

the long expanse of its unruffled chest. In the light of the lantern waggling back and forth stood out the red brittle light of its eye, like a currant. (p. 74)

The image of the bird that Herbie holds, as part of the chicken-chasing scene, exists in the earlier versions of the story. But not until the rough copy of "Soil in Smoke" does the bird's eye resemble a "currant." The phrase "like a currant" is a handwritten addition in the rough copy of "Soil in Smoke" (p. 69), and typed as part of the text in the neat copy. The effect of the addition is to link two important images in the novel.

The other reference to a currant in "Soil in Smoke" occurs in a passage that is part of a sequence in which Robina remembers restoring goods she stole. A year earlier, at the age of sixteen, Robina worked for a family vacationing at the nearby beach. She recalls the discovery of her theft of a "silver mesh purse" (p. 257) from the family's bungalow. The "County Constable" (p. 257), Flinders, had driven Robina home, and told her that if "she'd bring the purse to him at once . . . he wouldn't take her to jail; even her parents need not know" (pp. 257-258). As Roby guides Flinders to the hiding place of her stolen treasure, three of the younger Nebblin children join what becomes a procession:

Herbie and Myra and Ettie followed them along the berry and currant rows; she heard them trot, gasping, as she went on before, head down, swiftly. She muttered, "There!" And pointed at a tiny mound in the loose earth of the raspberry bushes. The constable kicked at it, looked at

her and dug into the earth with his fingers, pulled forth the purse . . . . The . . . fool, it was a wonder he hadn't gone for a spade, and stirred everybody up . . . . She remembered Mil, a month later: "I bet you thought you was it, leading a procession back through the orchard proudly, eh?"

She smiled. How did he make such guesses?  
"Oh, Mil! I was crying!" (p. 258)

Robina hides a presumably gaudy "silver mesh purse" near what to another eye might be more pleasing: "berry and currant rows" and "raspberry bushes." For Robina, the local fruits of the earth are of value primarily as a hiding place for a gaudy stolen object.

Robina remembers "currant rows" only inadvertently, in the course of remembering the discovery of her theft. She steals a thing of artificial, if any, beauty. However, Herbie sees the natural beauty of the bird he holds in his hand, and sees the "red brittle light of its eye" as being "like a currant" (p. 74). The word "currant" links the image of Herbie's perception with the image of Robina's perception. The image of the bird suggests the discoverable earthly paradise of the natural world that is part of everyday experience. But Robina's vision, like Mil's, does not admit such a possibility. Mil contracts venereal disease, and as for Robina, at times "her mind would say, clearly, 'Kleptomania'" (p. 258). Robina thinks of her stealing as "dangerous," and a "disease" (p.258): the term "disease" links the consequences of the visions of Mil and Robina.

The "peach" that Mil discovers at the dance at the Bluffs happens to be the cousin of Robina's boyfriend, and this circumstance adds to the suggestion that the visions of Mil and Robina have similar

limitations. As Robina explains to Mil, "She's his cousin, visiting here at their cottage, Celia Hurst is her name" (p. 32).

At the dance pavilion, Mil watches Robina's boyfriend, Stanley McCord, with suspicion and a little envy (p. 30). The atmosphere of the dance pavilion makes Mil "ready for love or battle" (p. 25), and if Celia Hurst prompts the former in Mil, her cousin, Stanley McCord, prompts the latter by mocking Celia for paying attention to Mil:

"Why, Mil," said Robina sweetly. "Let me make you acquainted with Stanley McCord."

The tall youth laughed shortly, not taking his eyes from the girl. Mil jumped, got a low hold, swung the long youth into the air, and brought him down crashing, prostrate. (p. 30)

Early in "Soil in Smoke," Celia and Stanley provide Mil with opportunities to express himself by physical means, and Mil subsequently demonstrates his limited capacity for pleasure. To a degree, Robina shares Mil's outlook. Money has a lot to do with her attraction to Stanley. Mil asks Robina,

"What millionaire's son is this Stanley, anyway?"

She shrugged. "You said it. His old man owns the big top-works in town. And say, you never could tell by the way he acted."

"Just as tight as any tin-horn sport, is he?"

"He's a swell fellow," she replied as though not hearing. (p. 33)

Although Robina has stolen in the past, and here again indicates her materialism in her regard for Stanley, her materialism is perhaps more moderate than Mil's. Mil aggravates his materialism by

calculation and premeditation. Near the Nebblin farm is

the farm of Ida Tenny, the old maid. She'd had the place left her years ago, by the death of an uncle she and her mother had lived with. The mother died, and Ida had never married. There were the customary neighbourhood jokes. "Home boys" in short trousers, and wastrel hired men were advised to marry Ida Tenny and get her farm. Mil thought the idea wouldn't have been so silly, if Ida had been half as old and twice as good-looking. He'd sell the farm if he ever got possession of it, and get out. Leave her too. That would be a stunt! But it would have been too much trouble. (p. 36)

Robina's materialism resembles Mil's; Mil sees Ida strictly as a means of getting "possession" of a farm, while Robina thinks of Stanley as her "dear possession" (p. 54). However, Robina seeing Stanley as a "dear possession" differs in degree, rather than kind, from her stealing the "possessions" (p. 55) of the vacationing people she worked for.

If Mil's obsession with seduction is a manifestation of his vision, a shoddily envisioned sort of an earthly paradise, his materialism is part of his diseased vision. However, materialism seduces his sister in more ways than one. Initially Robina steals, but her materialism leads to another sort of seduction. Stanley is wealthy, in Robina's eyes, and when he takes her for a drive, they go

from a concession line parallel with the ridge road, onto a side road. After passing a few fields, they came to woods that darkened the whole night, tall, and almost overhanging the road. Neither said anything, until a horse and buggy showed up, meeting them. It was moving very slowly, but the wheel-spokes flashed in the light of the car. A proud tired horse started to jog sedately, its head kept high by

a check-rein; for some reason it held to the middle of the road. Stanley had slowed the car, and curved around them. In the high buggy there was a blur; it looked as though one creature suddenly parted to form two, with faces pale in the corners of the seat. (p. 90)

The immediate reaction of Stanley and Robina to what they see is to "burst out laughing" (p. 90), but Robina subsequently thinks

it was the first time she had seen anything exactly like that. She felt sure it was something different from an ordinary hug and kiss. But somehow, in the dark, behind the sedately moving horse, it had seemed rather natural, the sort of thing you would expect. (p. 90)

Shortly afterwards, Stanley seduces Robina. The image of the couple passed on the road is central to the scene. Robina, puzzled by the sight, feels "sure" that what she has seen is "something different from an ordinary hug and kiss." Yet she also feels that "in the dark, behind the sedately moving horse, it had seemed rather natural." In other words, to Robina the image is one of innocent sexuality.

Robina's subsequent seduction implies that she may, like Mil, be an artist manqué, in that her confined vision makes her yearning for "unseizable" (p. 288) beauty destructive. Both Mil and Robina have creative urges: Mil busies himself with bits of discarded "farm machinery" when he has "his fits of wanting to make something" (p. 113), while Robina knits (p. 114), plays music by ear, and designs clothes well (p. 225). Yet Mil and Robina translate a yearning for the unseizable, not into artistic expression, but destructive self-indulgence.

Eventually Ben starts to court Robina, who finds Ben laughable. Upstairs in the farmhouse, Robina hears "Ben Frick's voice" and thinks that this is "the third Sunday running that Benny had come." Listening to her mother and Ben talking downstairs, in her bedroom Robina buries "her nose in the quilts, snickering" (p. 189). Robina thinks far less of Ben than she does of Stanley, who seduces her and subsequently abandons her. She considers Ben "a rube!" To Robina, Ben is inferior to Stanley because he has less money at his disposal. Coming downstairs, she sees Ben and notices that he is wearing "some kind of heavy gray suit and patent-leather shoes. From Eaton's Catalogue, no doubt. She smiled brightly, without saying anything" (p. 190).

The image of a couple in a horse-drawn vehicle prompts Robina's vision of an innocent sexuality, and subsequently Stanley seduces her in his car. When Ben comes to court Robina, in taking his leave he comments,

"Well, I guess I better be going. Some time I'll bring that horse old man Rendall's so proud of, and you can go for a buggy ride for a change."

Something in the tone of the last words made her reply quickly.

"No, thanks. I don't want to see any horse. We got plenty here. Nor car either for that matter." She saw his look of bewilderment as though a blow had been struck between his eyes. "Riding around the country's tiresome this time of year, don't you think?" she added lightheartedly.

She was rather elated after he had gone. After all it was some tribute to her, his coming; though she joined the boys in making

fun of him . . . . She even wondered next Sunday, whether he was coming again . . . it wouldn't be so bad to go driving with him once or twice. Stanley wouldn't be likely to hear about it . . . . (p. 192)

Robina's materialism seduces her to steal and then to prefer Stanley, who values cars, to Ben, who prefers horses. Ben can enjoy cars and the city (p. 191), but he does not dismiss animals, landscape, or rural life. His appreciation of horses links him to Robina's earlier vision of innocent sexuality, a vision that the image of a horse-drawn vehicle prompts.

Unlike Ben, Robina does not see any great beauty in the ordinary life about her or her own daily life. Instead, the ordinary course of life induces nausea in her:

Before putting the plate into the dishwasher Robina slashed a piece of beef from it onto the table. It had tiny drops of blood on the edge, and little red veins showing in the half-blanchéd flesh. Why was everything so horrible now, when you took a good look at it? She had never minded things like that. Forks, for example. Looking at forks, you knew they might have the least bit left between the tines. (p. 109)

The image of a scrap of leftover food as a nauseating bit of dead flesh captures Robina's view of ordinary life, or at least her momentary view. Like Mil, Roby perceives her problem not as a matter of vision, but as the place she happens to be stuck in. Materialism becomes part of the problem because money becomes a means of escape. When a neighbour asks Mil where he has been, Mil replies,

"The city. Just back for a kind of holiday."



"Toronto or Detroit?"  
 "Hell, do I look as though I'd been to  
 Toronto?" (p. 144)

Similarly, at a dance, the sight of a handsome stranger prompts Roby to think that if she

could . . . regularly, go to all the city dances, she might meet a few fellows like that. But of course the snappy ones were not here, you had to go to Detroit. (p. 296)

The yearning of Mil and Robina for Detroit is ominous because, in the context of "Soil in Smoke," such a yearning expresses a desire to escape from an environment that holds or genuinely promises the possibility of an earthly paradise. However, the oldest of the Nebblin children, Roland, who has the most patience with the work of the farm, does have a vision of an earthly paradise.

Roland staidly and quietly works hard on the farm. He enters the novel when he forcefully, if accidentally, presents Mil with a particularly useful manifestation of nature; Mil,

Rounding the corner of the barn . . . was nearly struck in the face by a forkful of manure heaved out of the doorway. Roland's dark head, uncovered, came around the doorframe:  
 "Say! You'll run into something--" (p. 14)

Roland becomes associated with fertility and farm work. In terms of vision, he is more akin to Ben than Mil. Suitably enough, it is Roland who leads the massive work of tobacco growing on the Nebblin farm, work undertaken in Mil's absence:

Mil took the third team and went to town to get some boards to form the sides of the bed, and braces to hold the tops together. Also they had to buy fifty yards of cotton, for their bed was to be a hundred and fifty feet long. They put the boards together on the side-hill facing south for the sunlight, then started sifting and cleaning the peat of weeds and soil and lumps, and taking it from the pile in wheelbarrow loads to dump into the frames. Then when the frames were filled, they went over the earth again with lawn rakes, levelling, pulverizing lumps, taking out the fragments of vegetation. At last the whole bed was level and black, more garden-like than any garden. (pp. 186-7)

Roland's leading the work of growing tobacco plants in a bed "more garden-like than any garden" implies that he has a place in Eden, or is privy to the presence or possibility of an earthly paradise in the world around him. Given Knister's explicit reference to Paradise Lost, the suggestion that Roland can see the Edenic in the world around him becomes stronger when Roland crushes a snake. As Roland is disking on a spring day, Herbie and his friend, Stevie, find a snake as they play nearby; they call Roland, who kills the snake (p. 201).

Roland, who can perceive the Edenic in the world of the farm, and who destroys a snake, has a vision of the intense beauty of the natural world, a vision that includes human presence. As Roland goes to find the "cows" that have "drifted to the far corner of the bush" (p. 211), he thinks,

She should be here, some girl different from the cackling ones you saw in town; there in the thicket should be a dim white shoulder, neck bent slender to hearken to his coming; ankles growing

from the thin moss and ferns, from the dried pool of long-drowned leaves. It was funny to get such fool ideas at twenty-eight. Twenty-eight years old and a fool. And ten minutes ago he had thought himself contented with the prospect of a big crop. That was the way, if you stopped working a day, you began to have such fool thoughts. He had lost his content. Nevertheless, when he looked around he was not surprised to see a girl's figure.

A great brown-rotting log lay away from its stump, and she sat on it. Her back was toward him, her ankles hidden wouldn't reach to the ferns. Her hair, dark in the dimness, loose-gathered on her neck. It was Robina. She did not turn, though she must have heard the cows pass, unless she had just come there. She was gazing through the edge of the thin woods, elbow on knee. Would he go and speak to her? He stopped and then went on again. She raised a hand from the log and pressed her heavy back hair, then let it fall on her hip, head bent aside as she still gazed beyond the bush, beyond the fields.

He went ahead noiselessly. (p. 211-12)

The vision of Roland, a snake-crusher and tiller of Eden, is a vision of an earthly paradise. Human presence is an integral part of this earthly paradise; Roland envisions a girl emerging from the ground, "ankles growing from the thin moss and ferns, from the dried pool of long-drowned leaves." In isolation, the fact that the girl is actually Robina has ambiguous implications. A possible pessimistic reading is that the girl of Roland's dreams is, in actuality, his seduced seventeen-year old sister. A more optimistic reading is that Roland's vision redeems Robina, and so she literally appears to grow out of the earthly paradise.

Later in the novel, Knister gives Robina a corresponding vision:

She turned into a leaf-strewn lane to a bush [sic]. The trees were immense. She had not been in a bush since she was a little girl, she thought--but yes, one Sunday in the summer, alone . . . Roland passing with the cows. The immense solid thickness of them was wonderful, and the scaly bark. In the top of one what looked like a bees' hive . . . . No, it must be leaves, a great mass; but how had they accumulated, and stuck together? Somehow the old trees were frightening. She walked on, stirring the light snow on the light leaves, and then glanced into the treetops and the slate sky, down the scales of the trunks.

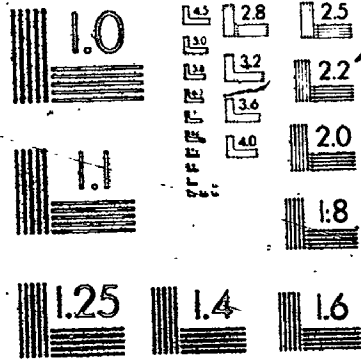
There was a strange smoky trunk before her, thick up to wide branches, like a thick ghost suddenly come into daylight. Stop and look again. Somehow it was good to look at, made you, standing there, glance back to its smooth surface again and again. The day was becoming softer, mistier. Tomorrow there would be no snow, but dirty roads and sodden fields. She sighed and walked forward. (pp. 259-60)

An addition to the neat copy of "Soil in Smoke" adds to the suggestion that Robina's vision is a companion-piece to Roland's. In the neat copy of "Soil in Smoke," Knister adds, "she thought--but yes, one Sunday in the Summer, alone . . . Roland passing with the cows." This passage does not appear in the corresponding scene in the rough copy of the work (p. 241). Knister's addition invites comparison of the two visions. Roland's is a summer vision, Robina's a winter one. Not sharing his vision, Robina dismisses the time at which Roland sees the "bush" as an "earthly paradise as a "Sunday in the Summer" when Roland was "passing with the cows." Robina cannot perceive the earthly paradise because she cannot envision the extraordinary beauty of what lies around her. She resolves to go to the city, thinking that "The days . . . would still be common until she went" (p. 286).

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At the close of the novel, Robina decides to leave for the city as Stanley drives her back from a dance. At least temporarily, her materialism gets the better of her, for before leaving the dance she steals a fox stole (p. 297). As she and Stanley drive from the dance, the "hazy sulphur road spun away beneath" (p. 299). The suggestion is that Roby is on the road to a form of hell. She asks Stanley to drive her to "the depot," as she is "going to take the Midnight for Detroit" (p. 300). The novel closes as Roby leaves for the city:

They crossed a farmer's bridge and backed into the road again. Far off, over fences and trees, in the west a fat sallow moon wallowed among snowy clouds. Soon daylight would come to these fields, soon Spring, ~~my~~, quarrels about taking the car out; dirty floors, steamy kitchen, the wrangling brothers, the shrieking sisters, the tired mother; and outside the lake rasping lonely at the end of the farm.

And she lonelier maybe, bewitched midget in the terrific city.

Down the short miles to the station, the car with its windows and close lights slicing moonlight on the strip of road was a prison gliding. (p. 300)

Mil is physically short and has a short-sighted vision, and as Robina leaves for Detroit she risks her vision reducing her to a "bewitched midget in the terrific city." Robina rejects Ben, who sees the world as a landscape of promise, in favour of Stanley and the enticement of material wealth. But Stanley's car is, for Robina, finally a "prison gliding." Ben--who eventually effectively loses interest in Robina--wonders whether it is the "Roland in Robina, or Mil in her" (p. 236) that predominates. However, Robina literally sees herself as

resembling Mil:

She saw herself as though in a mirror, rose-coloured evening dress, a light on her auburn hair, blue eyes, gleaming lips. And Mil, with his inquisitive but thin hawklike nose, like their father's, dark blue eyes that crinkled when he smiled, like hers. Of course they were a perfect resemblance for brother and sister. (p. 89)

For a time Ben would seem to want Robina to resemble Roland--but Robina herself wants to resemble Mil. And in pursuing this desire Robina last appears on a "hazy sulphur road" (p. 299), in a car that is "a pristine gliding" (p. 300).

The title "Soil in Smoke" suggests that finally Robina's immediate hopes of an earthly paradise disappear in the "smoke" of delusion. Leaving the dance with the stolen fox stole, Robina feels, "like a sparkmote in the blast of a locomotive's smoke-chimney. When the fire-box is opened the smoke is seen high above in its light. The sparks vanish. A spark in the light vanishing" (p. 299). When Mil first appears in the novel, he emerges from a farmyard building, from which "Blue jets of smoke chased one another from the roof, swept away to vanish in the light wind" (p. 3). Knister associates both Mil and Robina with vanishing or dissipating smoke, which suggests that both believe in delusory values. Both characters are associated with that which is insubstantial.

In comparison to "Group Portrait," "Soil in Smoke" presents a bleaker, and so more haunting, portrait of Robina. In "Group Portrait," Robina steals a purse from her employer; in "Soil in

Smoke, " Robina steals, in addition to a purse, a scarf and assorted unspecified articles (pp. 55 and 257-258). While Robina implicitly agrees to sleep with Stanley in the last scene of "Group Portrait," in the later version of the novel, Stanley repeatedly seduces Robina. In "Soil in Smoke," Stanley resumes his friendliness toward Robina, and subsequently his sexual relations with her, when they encounter each other one evening at the dance pavilion on the beach; between dances, Stanley drives Robina away in his new car, seduces her, and takes her back to the pavilion before the evening's dancing is over (pp. 213-221). Robina impulsively steals a fur stole in the final scene of "Group Portrait" but, in the concluding dance scene of "Soil in Smoke," she steals a fur stole belonging to a girl Stanley has paid attention to (pp. 290 and 297). The later version of the novel therefore clarifies Robina's dual seduction by materialism: her faith in materialistic pleasure accounts both for her theft and her attraction to the unattractive (p. 299) but relatively wealthy Stanley.

In comparison to "Group Portrait," "Soil in Smoke" presents a more intense polarity between those who would create and those who prefer to consume, or those who value their immediate environment, and those who deplore it. This intensification occurs as Knister makes increased use of direct and oblique biblical allusions. Changing Del's name to Mil enables the unobtrusive inclusion of a reference to Milton's Paradise Lost in the later version of the novel. In "Group Portrait," Roland hears from Del that he would like to raise



"Hob"<sup>14</sup> when he spends his money; in "Soil in Smoke" when Roland refers to Mil's raising "Hob," Mil replies, "'Me? Raise Cain and put a prop under him!' Mil clutched his brother's arm" (p. 15). In clasping his "brother's" arm as he speaks of raising "Cain," Mil becomes a more sinister character than he was in his earlier incarnation as Del. Del jokes about returning to the Nebblin farm after being in "Hell" (p. 185); Mil, however, refers to "Hell" as "my old home town" (p. 207). (When one remembers Knister's expressed taste for regionalist literature, Mil's remark becomes a particularly ominous one.)<sup>15</sup>

As well as heightening the poverty of the visions of Mil and Robina, the revisions that distinguish "Soil in Smoke" from "Group Portrait" intensify the value of Roland's vision. Roland crushes a "writhing" (p. 201) snake in "Soil in Smoke," while it is Frank who strikes at an already "apparently dead" (p. 178) snake in "Group Portrait." "Group Portrait" includes only a brief discussion of Roland shovelling peat to be used for raising tobacco seedlings (p. 161), while "Soil in Smoke" additionally describes, in lush detail, Roland directing the construction of peat-filled hot-beds which, in being "more garden-like than any garden" (pp. 186-187), have an Edenic perfection. In "Group Portrait," Roland's woodland vision includes the sight of Robina, "head bent as she still gazed" (p. 190). "Soil in Smoke" describes Roland as seeing Robina with "head bent aside as she still gazed beyond the bush, beyond the fields" (p. 212). The later version of the scene suggests that Robina overlooks the

beauty of her immediate surroundings, even as Roland envisions part of the Nebblin farm as an earthly paradise. Knister's revised treatment of Robina's winter walk in woodland also emphasizes her comparatively intense desire to escape. In "Group Portrait," she sees birds as the scene closes, and wishes she might "follow" (p. 259) them; in "Soil in Smoke," she sees birds and wishes "her feet might take off from" the ground (p. 261), in order that she flee from an environment she finds bleak and dreary.

A small but significant revision exemplifies how Knister heightens the polarity of vision found in the later version of the work. Del, recovering from venereal disease, watches his brothers build a garage, and sees the road near the farm as bleak: "Blue sand was the track, and blue ice lined it in streaks. The sun might melt it" (p. 267). Mil, similarly recovering from illness, sees the road in less hopeful terms: "Sulphury blue sand the track, blue ice lined it in streaks. The sun wouldn't melt it" (p. 276). While Del thinks the sun "might" melt the ice on the road, Mil thinks the sun "wouldn't" have a thawing effect. The added word, "Sulphury," also implies that Mil has a more hellishly despairing view of the world than Del. The change and addition that occur in this passage imply that Mil's vision--he watches the road as these thoughts cross his mind--paves the metaphorical road to his private hell. Robina is last seen as a passenger in Stanley's car, and in "Group Portrait" (p. 298), as in "Soil in Smoke," "The hazy sulphur road spun away beneath" (p. 299). However, only in the later version does Mil perceive the road as

"sulphury." "Soil in Smoke" presents both Mil and Robina as pursuing sulphurous, or hellishly unpleasant, paths in life. The later version of the novel suggests that Robina, like Mil, has a vision that paves the road to a private hell. Knister's increased use of biblical references, direct and not, sharpens the central tension between the visions of those who can and those who cannot perceive the possibility of an earthly paradise.

"Soil in Smoke" presents the different visions of the three eldest Nebblin children of what an earthly paradise consists of. Roland, patient with the work of the farm, has a vision of a corner of the Nebblin farm as an earthly paradise. Mil overlooks the life around him in his obsessive pursuit of pleasure, and his physical disease implies the disease of his vision. Robina has the capacity to glimpse both visions, but follows Mil's and, as the story closes, she manifests her kleptomania just before going to the city. She reiterates her choice of vision in preferring Stanley to Ben. Roby's response to the image of a couple in a horse-drawn buggy demonstrates her potential strength of vision. However, the twinned images of the corresponding visions of Roland and Roby demonstrate the distance of Roby's outlook from Roland's. The real horror, in "Soil in Smoke," is the hideous waste of possibility that Mil, and especially Robina, become associated with, and so they stand as artist manqué figures.

The title "Soil in Smoke" evokes an image that characterizes the direction of the novel as a whole, for it implies that the further consciousness moves from an awareness of the land, or the ground of

ordinary life, the further the distance from genuine dreams of the possibility of an earthly paradise. As Knister writes elsewhere, "Nothing, not poetry or dreams, can exist except on the basis of reality."<sup>16</sup> In Knister's last novel the raising of crops and the raising of visions are, in a sense, one.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Waddington, "Raymond Knister and the Canadian Short Story," M.A. Carleton University 1977, p. 223. Subsequent references to this thesis will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Letter received from Dr. K.E. Garay, McMaster University Library, 4 December 1984.

<sup>3</sup> "Soil for Smoke," TS, Box 11, File 4. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Letter received from Dr. R.C. Brandeis, Victoria University Library, 12 December 1984.

<sup>5</sup> "Soil in Smoke," TS of 300 pages, Folders 27-36. The Raymond Knister Collection, Victoria University Library, Toronto, Ontario. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text.

<sup>6</sup> "Soil in Smoke," TS, (car.) Box 4, Files 4 and 5. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Cape, Letter to Raymond Knister, 11 August 1932. The Raymond Knister Papers, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Imogen [Knister] Givens, "Raymond Knister—Man or Myth?" Essays in Canadian Writing, No. 16 (Winter 1979-1980), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Bonita O'Halloran, "Chronological History of Raymond Knister," in Raymond Knister: Poems, Stories and Essays, ed. David Arnason (Montreal: Bellrock Press, 1975), p. 198.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Knister, "Long Point, Lake Erie," Canadian Geographical Journal, II, No. 1 (January 1931), p. 78. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Knister, "Farthest South in Canada's Domain," Saturday Night, 5 March 1932, p. 2. Further references to this article will appear in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Knister, "Pelee Island," Canadian Geographical Journal, VI, No. 6 (June, 1933), p. 300. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Knister, "Via Faust," TS. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>14</sup> "Group Portrait," TS, p. 18. Knister Papers, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Mil refers to "Hell" as "my old home town." Springsteen's "My Hometown," which concludes Born in the U.S.A. (1984), includes the injunction, "take a good look around, this is your hometown." This suggestion reflects the aesthetic of Born in the U.S.A. and the world view which permeates Knister's work. The work of Knister, like that of Springsteen, is an ongoing invitation to "take a good look" at the here and now. Robina, rather than either Roland or Ben, wonders "Why was everything so horrible now, when you took a good look at it?" (p. 109). Knister's portrait of Robina is haunting because she is under a delusion when she believes herself able to take an accurate "good look" at what surrounds her "now." The command, "take a good look," arises from a vision which celebrates everyday reality, and the immediate environment, for all the limitations and inhumanity of "ordinary" life. It is interesting that local and biblical references occur in the work of both artists. In the work of both writers, everyday reality generates the kind of possibilities represented by hell and the promised land. Professor D.L. Hudecki's discussion of Springsteen's work is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Knister, "The Poetic Muse in Canada," Saturday Night, 6 October 1928, p. 3.

## CONCLUSION

Textual evidence suggests that the celebration of everyday reality is a recurrent and central concern in Knister's novels and novellas. Over the decade in which he wrote longer prose fiction, Knister assimilated tangible and intangible realities in his work, with increasing skill, and did so by using a variety of techniques. The handbook format of this thesis enables the discussion of the technical and thematic range of Knister's longer prose fiction, published and unpublished.

Knister's first novel, "Group Portrait," makes the theme of celebrating the commonplace central in giving the comparative reactions of characters toward their immediate environment. "Turning Loam," also an unpublished novel, makes an acute sense of tangible reality the gift of one main character, and a keen sense of intangible, visionary reality the gift of the work's other main character. The union of these characters closes the novel, and such a union suggests Knister's aesthetic to be the concurrent acknowledgement of tangible and intangible realities. Knister's third novel, White Narcissus, derives energy from the tension between clashing visions of reality; on the one hand, obsessive characters diminish their own lives and blight the lives of others while, on the other hand, those of broader vision struggle to

extricate themselves from obsessive channels of thought and feeling, and to acknowledge the multiplicity of reality. Obsession becomes associated with the myth of Narcissus, while open-mindedness becomes associated with the world view expressed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, if not nineteenth-century American romance in general.

"Innocent Man" is, Knister expressly states, based on experienced reality; having been in prison himself, Knister bases his novella on the reality of prison experience, and concludes the work with his protagonist's newly-won respect for others and appreciation of so-called ordinary reality. However, in Knister's fictional world, not only a jail can be imprisoning; obsessive or restrictive vision, or even urban stresses, can also cause entrapment. "Cab Driver," an unpublished novella, presents Chicago as a Babylon that degrades its inhabitants. Knister's novella smoothly assimilates the physical reality of the streets of the city and the metaphorical equation of Chicago with Babylon.

My Star Predominant presents Keats as poet and master maker of images and, in Knister's novel, technique reiterates theme; images provide the structural basis of the work. As the novel concludes, and the theme of the great artist's vision enduring moves to the foreground of My Star Predominant, Knister increasingly makes reference to Dante. Imagination becomes the great transformer and, just as Dante presents the divine and the diabolical as one vast continuum, Knister's Keats, like Knister himself, acknowledges the tangible and intangible realities of experience. My Star Predominant



recognizes the flowers of the field and the flowers of the imagination; Dante's heaven culminates in an enormous rose.

In the novella "Peaches, Peaches," there is a sophisticated blending of orders of reality. As the protagonist's consciousness of sexuality increases, the peach harvest dictates unrelenting work, while the protagonist's recognition of sexuality accompanies the abrupt cessation of the peach season. A season in the life of the protagonist and a season of one crop's fruition are initially parallel, and the climax of the work is the fusion of the two seasons covered in "Peaches, Peaches." Knister's last novella is a doubled fantasy rooted in reality.

"Soil in Smoke," Knister's last novel, is a revised version of his first novel. Although still unpublished, "Soil in Smoke" is a powerful novel that should be in print, and readily available. The main characters tend either to enjoy or despise their rural environment, and attitude toward everyday circumstances becomes a matter of vision in the course of the novel. To be contemptuous of everyday rural life is to be diseased; those who lust after urban delights suffer from either venereal disease or kleptomania. Those who dismiss the beauty of a red currant throw away a jewel beyond price; Knister's image of a red currant exemplifies the discoverable beauty of everyday reality. In Knister's longer prose fiction, images celebrate so-called ordinary reality in pointing to realities tangible and intangible. Perception of the everyday world is a feast for the senses. To find nothing to celebrate in ordinary life, and so long

to escape is, in the context of "Soil in Smoke," to exchange the substantial and enduring for the insubstantial and ephemeral, or to exchange "soil" for "smoke." Knister's last novel culminates in a vision of everyday reality as encompassing the possibilities that Eden and hell represent. Those who cannot envision the paradisaical possibilities of the earth become diseased, or the living dead.

Knister's longer prose fiction is enduring work, but represents what would perhaps constitute only a phase in the work of a writer having an ordinary life span. Knister achieved a great deal in his decade of longer prose fiction writing, but did not live long enough to explore many literary possibilities beyond those precedents offered by American writers of the midwest, whose work Knister became familiar with as a young man.

In the form of a handbook, this thesis introduces the technical and thematic range of Knister's longer prose fiction, published and unpublished. Knister's longer prose fiction is experimental, and moves from a Canadian writer who envisions the things photographs cannot show to the life of Keats, from the hellish world of prison experience to the dubieties of sexual politics as seen over the course of a peach season. However, the celebration of everyday reality--without a denial of its imperfections--lies at the heart of Knister's longer prose fiction. Knister's novels and novellas create a land made of the realities the photograph records and the artist envisions, an enduring land of promise that is a genuine dream because it arises from experienced reality, a region in which the

°artist's vision makes possible belief in everyday life as inherently offering the possibilities of hell--and the promised land.

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