

WISEMAN'S FICTION : OUT OF PAIN, JOY

par Patricia MORLEY

Adele Wiseman of Manitoba has written two novels, with a curious hiatus of eighteen years between. **The Sacrifice** (1956) is a good novel ; **Crackpot** (1974) is a great one. A single vision sustains both novels, but the relative immaturity of the vision in **The Sacrifice** seems to me to be responsible for the uncertainties of its technique. In **Crackpot**, the earlier ambivalence has been resolved and a mature spiritual vision is expressed in brilliant comic form.

At the heart of **The Sacrifice** stands a holy man who is driven to kill a whore and who comes to reject, in this moment of mad lucidity, his vaunted moral superiority to her and to the murderers of his two sons. The woman, however, understands little or nothing save her sensual needs and her yearning for security and acceptance. By leaving Laiah on an animal level in this way, and by allowing Abraham's moral scorn to mingle uneasily with that of the narrative voice, the force of the theoretical conviction of the sinful equality of mankind before the grace of a mysterious Providence is seriously undercut.

At the heart of **Crackpot** stands a completely unsentimentalized whore who is also a good woman : generous, self-sacrificing, responsible, honest, and loving. Hoda's innocence mirrors and matches that of her saintly father, despite her comic insistence on her worldly wisdom and her impatience with what she sees as Danile's naiveté. Hoda's sacrifice, in accepting the painful burden of incest rather than risk psychological damage to her son, is simultaneously her loss of innocence and her acceptance, like Abraham, of her share in human guilt : "And she touched, that night, the outermost boundary of aloneness that can be reached by a human being who is yet denied that privilege of loss of responsibility in suffering, which is the gift of madness (1). Whereas sacrifice is central to both novels, the altered emphasis between the one which bears this title and the later novel reflects the maturing of Wiseman's vision as it moves from a preoccupation with suffering and evil towards a whole-hearted celebration of human existence.

In the first novel, the central image of the sacrifice gathers significance as it recurs. Abraham tells his friend Chaim of a traumatic experience in his adolescence when he was forced by his master the

butcher, in the absence of a proper shoichet, to slaughter a cow that was to be sold to Jewish customers as kosher meat, Abraham sees this sacrifice as his real Bar Mitzvah or coming of age, an experience which opened to him both human baseness and the mystery of creation, the wonder of life and death. The murder of Abraham's first two sons in a pogrom appears as a sacrifice to an inhuman god : their dead bodies suspended on poles in the village square afford a demonic form of the tree of life. Abraham's faith is temporarily shattered. He has recovered that faith by the time he tells his son Isaac of the archetypal sacrifice recorded in the Pentateuch, where an earlier Abraham was prepared to offer his son to God as proof of faith and absolute obedience. Wiseman's Abraham sees in the ancient story "the point of mutual surrender," one which binds and unites the three participants : "it is like a circle- the completed circle, when the maker of the sacrifice and the sacrifice himself and the Demander who is the Receiver of the sacrifice are poised together, and the life flows into eternity, and for a moment all three are as one" (2).

Isaac sacrifices his own life in entering a burning synagogue to rescue the Torah. His slow death is not accomplished for many months and during this period, shamed by the public image of his heroism, Isaac is forced to confront his pride and sinfulness. While revealing Isaac's loneliness, his humility, his desperate need to touch other humans, Wiseman uses the occasion to confirm the multiple ways in which any event may be perceived and hence the difficulty of our seeing the truth (S 216). Hoda comes to a similar realization when she is forced to confront Danile's version of their early life together and the difference between his version and hers : "She had hardly as yet succeeded in holding her own memories to a formal pattern which would release a minimum of pain ; how could she cope with new revelations from Daddy too ? The minute you let yourself become too aware of another person's world you found yourself carrying that too, and if you appeared in that world, foreign to yourself and unattractive, how oppressively all the worlds weighed down on you" (C 292). Isaac's inner state at the time of his death is not revealed, however, and the episode lacks the kind of dynamism and inevitability which mark **Crackpot**.

The final variants of the sacrifice, in the first novel, are Laiah's murder and Chaim's realization that Abraham's act is both self-condemnation and self-sacrifice. The murder is well validated on the literal level, and the scene is blackly comic as Laiah's attempts at seduction and Abraham's, at self-justification, are repeatedly misunderstood by both

parties. Up until the critical moment, Abraham believes that he has always wanted only one thing : "to grow, to discover, to build" (S 299). He believes that his was the voice of praise, the path of creation, the choice of goodness ; he sees his path as infinitely distanced from Laiah's. Her proffered throat returns him, as in a dream, to the action he was forced to take on the shoichet's platform, the moment when he created death and felt that time was reduced to a still point. Laiah's eyes at this juncture are described with a phrase that recalls the eyes of the cow about to be slaughtered (S 38, 303). Later, Chaim sees that Abraham has used the knife in his own heart, and the confession that Abraham's lawyer fails to understand reveals that Abraham has renounced the self-righteousness upon which most of his life has been built : " 'That I have taken life life' --Abraham swayed -- 'that I have killed my sons, that I have made myself equal with my enemies, that it was in me, womb of death, festering, in no one else . . . Why did I weep, then, when I saw them hanging, swaying at the will of the wind ? Why did I tear my hair when he lay there ? When in me, all the time--'" (S 326). Abraham's humility and repentance are strongly depicted, but the sins of which he accuses himself remain theoretical. One senses, uneasily, the author's manipulation of her characters to her thematic ends. In **Crackpot**, the protagonist is not idealized in this way.

Some of the events of Laiah's life parallel those of Hoda's, yet the 'loose woman' figure is strikingly different in the two novels. The death of Laiah's mother has forced her, like Hoda, to act the role of parent at the early age of twelve and become the support of others. Laiah goes into service as a maid and is seduced by her employer, just as Hoda suffers the sexual advances of the husbands of the women who employ her to clean and of the local butcher in exchange for meat scraps. Laiah tells Abraham that her life might have been different if she had "fallen among good people earlier". (The phrase forms a curious inversion of the more common "fallen among thieves" from the New Testament parable). But while Hoda sees that the world, including her part in it, is comic, Laiah lacks a sense of humour as well as any real self-consciousness or self-understanding, and is the constant butt of other people's humour at her expense. She has, as Abraham notes, no sense of the fitness of things or the passing of time. Her "unseasonable movements" remind him of a puppy, but she "could not waggle her hips forever in the face of time" (S 93). Laiah has "predatory" teeth and, in the final crisis scene, predatory lips (S 188, 296). The theoretical nature of Abraham's spiritual crisis does little to mitigate his earlier denunciation

of Laiah as an annihilator, demonically barren, "a great overripe fruit without seed" (S 261). Laiah is erotically attracted by Abraham's beard, which reminds her of her first master and her first experience of sex. The beard symbol is part of a dense network of images and hints at the burning bush where Moses encountered God. It augments the pathos of Laiah's situation but fails to redeem the basic ambivalence which surrounds the treatment of her character. One suspects that the author's attitude to this figure is unresolved.

Wiseman's comic talents are very much in evidence in the early novel, despite an occasional unevenness in tone or narrative voice. Mrs Plopler, Abraham's landlady when he first arrives in Winnipeg from Eastern Europe, is a marvellous creation. With her sharp tongue ("gentle as a nutcracker"), her shrewish personality, her consistent selfishness, and the hypocrisy which presents all this as altruism, Mrs. Plopler is one of the novel's memorable characters. She is allowed to reveal herself through a very effective ironic technique. Eventually the landlady evokes our compassion and not simply our amused scorn, as the victim of a terminal illness. The novel is full of richly comic scenes such as Abraham's tale of the cheating Mrs. Slutsky who takes advantage of what she thinks is Abraham's preoccupation with another customer to eat more corned beef than she puts on the butcher's scales ; or the young boys' peeing contest, where "sun-streaked arrows" stream across the pit (S 88, 206).

The point of view is multiple, that of the narrator combining in turn with that of various characters. An alternating point of view frequently becomes a comic device. An argument over Darwinian theory between Abraham and Isaac is succeeded by Abraham's more tolerant viewpoint when he is alone ; then by Isaac's conviction, expressed to Ruth, of his father's total lack of understanding ; and finally by Ruth's silent contemplation of **Isaac's** lack of understanding (S 77-80). Three worlds-of faith, of intellect, and of the emotions and practical experience-jostle comically for supremacy, while each of the characters perceive **the others** as naive. A similar exchange contrasts the views of Abraham, Isaac and Chaim : Abraham sees himself as an advanced thinker in relation to his conservative friend, just as Isaac sees himself in relation to his father (S 111). Opposing points of view can also be tragic, as in the bitter and powerfully depicted scene between the widowed Ruth and her father-in-law, an exchange which drives Abraham into the streets and, eventually, to Laiah's apartment.

The novel lacks a strong narrative line and suffers from a

profusion of events and characters. It is a portrait of a community as well as a family dynasty, both groups being illumined from the burning core of the sacrifice. But there is a self-consciousness about Abraham's final epiphany ("When a human being cries out to you, no matter who it is, don't judge him, don't harm him, or you turn away God Himself") and Moses's first stumbling steps towards love and understanding as he holds his grandfather's hand. The achievement here, while remarkable, is still not of the first order.

"Out of Shem Berl and Golda came Rahel. Out of Malka and Benyamin came Danile. Out of Danile and Rahel came Hoda. Out of Hoda, Pipick came, Pipick born in secrecy and mystery and terror, for what did Hoda know?" The opening of **Crackpot** picks up the tonic notes : of comedy, by listing human lineage in equine terms ; of life and death as inter-related mysteries ; of continuity, permanence, wholeness--in the midst of flux and multiplicity. A kabbalistic legend of creation stands as epigraph : "He stored the Divine Light in a Vessel, but the Vessel, unable to contain the Holy Radiance, burst, and its shards, permeated with sparks of the Divine, scattered throughout the Universe". Wiseman's second novel reveals that the crack(ed) pot which, to conventional people, is fat Hoda or her blind and pious father, is also an overflowing vessel of light and love.

The metaphor of shards, or pieces impregnated by divinity, branches into numerous analogies in the novel, one of the most amusing being Hoda's adolescent idea of the way in which babies are conceived. People are pieces, people have pieces, people make pieces. The universe may appear as a jigsaw puzzle for a blindman, but eventually things fit together and "the ugly truth would be born". Shards or fragments are identified with pain, joy, truth, and finally--as part of the kabbalistic vision--the unity of the cosmos. After the night with her teenage son and the sleepless hours that follow, Hoda flounders among "the painful fragments and the bizarre ironies of her life", feeling herself broken "into a thousand thousand pieces (C 252, 255). During that traumatic encounter, she thinks of the pieces into which human beings are broken and of their fragility. She envisages truth as compassionate hands holding "all the aching fragments of all the aching lives" to reveal "a dignity beyond pain" (C 254-255). Yet the multiple strands of the selves are "inextricably intertwined" (C 279), the damaged fragments bound to one another in pain and joy. Who should know this better than Hoda, who describes herself as "part-time wife to the whole damn world" (C 285). The sexual metaphor thus supports the metaphysical one.

Crackpot begins with Hoda's childhood in Winnipeg. Hunchbacked Rahel carries her little girl to the various houses where she cleans and uses food to keep her quiet. Rahel's employers mock the already fat child. By the third page we have encountered love, fear, humiliation, sadism, courage, defiance, all in the simplest of terms.

The bedtime stories told by Hoda's blind father introduce both the old world from which he came and the world of myth. When a plague struck Eastern Europe, Danile's ghetto resorted in desperation to its ancient cure. In Danile's words, "they take the poorest, most unfortunate, witless creatures, man and woman, who exist under the tables of the community . . . and they bring them together in the field of death. It is the tradition to take the craziest and the most helpless you can find . . . Everything is done just as for a proper wedding . . ." (C 17).

Thus Hoda is conceived in a graveyard, just as Lazar the 'mocky' archetypal survivor of the holocaust, is reborn as he clammers out of the deathpit. Out of death, life ; out of darkness, light ; out of plague and deformity, wholeness ; and out of suffering, joy. Wiseman's novels are rich in archetypal metaphors of social life : weddings, funerals, births ; seed-time; growth and harvest. Variants on the image of the tree of life surround the story of Abraham's family. Wiseman's optimism can be seen as graves and coffins are metamorphosed into images of life and copulation (3). And in Hoda's realization that there is little to choose between old sorrow and old joy. As a regular mourner at local funerals, Hoda joins herself to the other mourners in companionable grief and thereby affirms her own life (C 279-80).

Rahel considers her marriage, to a man who cannot see her crooked back, to be a humiliating miracle but a miracle none the less. The healthy child is another. Danile lost his sight at the age of seven through looking too boldly at the sun, but believes that God blinded him "for reasons of His own, and the loss is nothing to the gain". Danile's attraction to the sun in childhood becomes an image of the extraordinary gentleness and innocence of his nature, and of his religious faith. Only a child or a fool, thinks his wife, could see the world as the product of God's goodness. Danile is the good fool or holy idiot of mystical tradition, and his blindness is a central and ironic metaphor. Danile sees divine providence where others see confusion and evil.

Rahel dies when Hoda is a young adolescent. Uncle Nate, whose stinginess is the butt of considerable humour, suggests that Danile and

Hoda enter separate institutions. Uncle's generosity, at this time of crisis for Hoda and her father, takes the form of a prestigious gift to the Jewish orphanage. Hoda is determined to stay with her father. She can sell his baskets ; and the butcher offers scraps of meat in exchange for furtive caressings. Hoda's gradual descent (or ascent) into the world's oldest profession, her bearing a son without knowing she is pregnant, her leaving the baby on the doorstep of the Jewish orphanage, and her longstanding delusion that her father is ignorant of what is going on under his nose : all are believable, in Wiseman's handling. And poignant. And very funny.

Hoda's assumption of Danile's ignorance of the means by which she earns their livelihood is gradually revealed as **Hoda's** blindness. Danile does see. But his faith endures, embracing even Lazar's dreadful story : "Ever since he told me, I've closed my eyes on it every night and opened them to it every morning. He has put pictures in my eyes and a stench in my nose, and cries in my ears that I cannot avoid The cruellest thing about being blind is that you cannot close your eyes to what you see. Like it ? If I could learn to bear it ! And yet, I remind myself that he was plucked alive from all that dead flesh And when I remember the miracles of my own life I think how strange and wonderful it is that he should come to us" (C 293). Out of death, life ; out of painful fragmentation, wholeness. The novel's theme, caught in the epigraph from the Kabbala, is expressed through the central episodes based upon the experiences of Danile, Hoda, Pipick, and Lazar.

The artistry lies in the novel's form. Wiseman's vision comes to us through a melodramatic plot and characters who are both grotesque and pathetic. What could so easily degenerate into sentimentality (the whore with a heart of gold) somehow never does. Poverty, illness, betrayal, humiliation are contained in an ironic and comic structure which never falters. The surface point of view varies as the narrator assumes the tones of the various characters, most frequently Hoda's. Danile's idealism contrasts effectively with the pragmatism of his wife and daughter. They are, if not cynical, at least sharply aware of human fallibility and harsh necessity, whereas Danile is initially presented as naive. The underlying point of view of the author is expressed through the totality of fictional technique. Near the end of the novel, the reader is increasingly detached from Hoda. Her views are ironically revealed as unreliable, despite the sympathy and humour with which she is portrayed.

Wiseman avoids the twin dangers of sentimentality and cynicism

which her material might so easily have evoked and skilfully exploits its comic possibilities. Daddy loudly encourages Hoda's frequent visitors to study : "It made Hymie a little uncomfortable, because the word for "study" in Hebrew sounds like the word for "pig" in Yiddish, and he thought, **her old man really is cracked**, but didn't say anything, naturally, because of Hoda's temper". Hoda presses Daddy's baskets upon her customers for an extra fee, oblivious of the mute witness which the baskets bear : "When he left, with Danile's encouragement of 'pig ! pig !' following him out of the house, so that he thought, uneasily, **Jeez, what a crackpot !** he had to stuff the bag into his coat, first, because he wasn't going to be seen carrying it, for godsake, in the midst of winter, too. That Hoda !" (C 120). Other comic highlights include Hoda's effort to lessen Pipick's nervousness by blaming sexual ineptitude on the capitalist system (C 236) ; Hoda's unconscious encouragement of Lazar by her loving leaning which allows her to fan out her leg and ease her thigh burn ; the teasing to which she is subjected at the kibitzarnia when she threatens to turn monogamous ; or the final scene in bed with Lazar as Hoda "nuzzled into him with elephantine coyness" in an attempt to mediate between him and his dead.

Many of the minor characters, as in **The Sacrifice**, are as memorable as the protagonists. There is Uncle Nate's wife, a female Scrooge and the bane of his existence. At Rahel's shiva, the female mourners are delighted to discover that this wealthy woman has cheated a cake of three eggs : "It was enough to reconcile you to your own poverty." Hoda's teachers include the homely but kindhearted Miss Flake, who sprays beautiful phrases through earnest teeth and has a gift for hectic metaphor ; and the irreverently named Miss Boltholmsup, who attempts to refashion the world into her image of decency and good taste. The latter provides an hilarious context for a satirical portrait of WASP attitudes, depicted as fearful of sex, intolerant of differences, and determined to ignore the existence of anything as offensive as human hatreds and passions.

Central to Wiseman's technique is her feeling for and love of language. Her range is remarkable. It moves between the heights of poetry and the coarseness of slang. Wiseman is not one to refuse the universe, or any portion thereof. Hoda's sense of humour is frequently the vehicle for metaphors and puns. She thinks of herself as "an actress on the mattress", and boasts "To err is human, to recline divine". "Moving up into administration", as hostess of Limpy's kibitzarnia, makes everything go more easily. When Pipick's presence as **pisher**, or spare man to com-

plete the necessary minimum for prayer, excites raids by neighbouring congregations, his synagogue comes up with a "counter pisher poacher plan" (C 226). Puns extend even to the bitter dregs of experience, when Lazar describes the mass murder of his village as giving "the lye" to his life (C 296). The word-play climaxes on the novel's closing page as Hoda drifts into sleep beside her future husband, a scene which owes something both to Molly Bloom's soliloquy and to the gaily resurrecting corpses of **Finnegans Wake**. Past and future problems, Hoda thinks, can be faced with the encouragement of a wall-to-wall mattress : "Almost a real mother !' Lazar swam towards her. "CONDOMS", she affirmed with energy. "PREVIENCE", she held out her arms, a true bride."INCESTRY" she sobbed, as she reeled him in by his umbilicus. 'Sons' cried Danile. 'Lovers !' she confessed, weeping extravagantly"(4). Hoda's dream-consciousness embraces her past and future life and knits together the characters and fragments of the novel in "the ardour of her vision . . . in the brimming pot together". Thus language serves theme and technique, vision.

The novel catches all the comic possibilities in human sexuality, all the pathos, and much of the grandeur. Hoda is a marvellous creation, earth mother and mistress to mankind, large enough in body and spirit to welcome the world. Despite the hilarity of many of its scenes, **Crackpot** excites that sense of reverence and gratitude which is felt for a work which both expresses and expands one's sense of the mystery and beauty of life.

There is an odd phenomenon in Canadian letters of fine single novels from authors who never publish a second. We are thankful that Wiseman did not elect to follow this pattern. **Crackpot** is worth waiting for. It contains a lifetime of living and learning. The result is a work where the extremes of simplicity and complexity meet. A work which evokes laughter and tears. A work, quite simply, which delights.

NOTES

- (1) *Adele Wiseman, Crackpot, Toronto : Mc Clelland ans Stewart, 1974, p. 251. Further quotations from the novel have the page numbers, from this editions, in the text.*

- (2) *Adele Wiseman, **The Sacrifice**, Laurentian Library, Series 8, Toronto: Macmillan, 1968, p. 178. Further quotations from the novel have the page numbers, from this edition, in the text.*
- (3) *Moses and his young friends shoot their sun-filled "arrows" across the pit where the synagogue has stood ; and Lazar survives the death-pit to become Hoda's lover and the sire (in Hoda's anticipatory vision) of Danile's grandson.*
- (4) *Previencence suggests preview, previous, prescient, etc. Incest combines incest and ancestry, in the portmanteau style of punning of **Finnegans Wake**. The Laurentian reverence for sex is both affirmed and parodied through the implications of this reference to **Sons and Lovers** in the context of **Crackpot**. An article could be devoted solely to an analysis of the last page of Wiseman's second novel.*