

## Notes de lecture : A BALANCING ACT OF RELATIVITY

John Buell. **Playground**. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976, 247p.

Not often, unfortunately, does the reader of contemporary Canadian fiction centered on the wilderness succeed in avoiding either a narcissistic plunge into painfully transparent efforts at a mythopoetic vision making a virtue of nescience (with the appropriate learned analogues of Blake, Jung and Kierkegaard), or a redundant description of the face of nature in words worn thin. The author of **The Pyx, Four Days**, and **The Shrewsdale Exit** presents us in **Playground** with a notable and welcome exception. A wittily-conceived and well-expressed tale refreshing in its uncommon common sense and knowledge of facts both surface and subsurface, **Playground** is a distinctive ironic speculation on a perennial theme of modern fiction : the enlightenment of a protagonist in a boundless playground of paradox, an element of endless irony which, quite logically, does not spare the ironic imagination itself.

The essential paradox of **Playground** is perhaps best described in terms of conflicting yet mutually-defining systems of logic governing time, space, and the actions of men as actors and spectators bound to play their parts in those systems -- notions of no little significance for the protagonist, Spence Morison, a wealthy resident of Baie d'Urfé in his late 40's, lost in the jungle of central Québec. Morison departs late in June, bound for Chibougamau (ironically like Columbus) aboard a Chrysler station wagon loaded with holiday technology. From there, he plans to pilot a Cessna to Lac des Grises, 80 miles <sup>50</sup> north of due west of Chibougamau, there to establish (so he thinks) a simulated playground for himself and the three companions later to join him. As one seeking to escape "the binding logic of wheel and pavement and clock" (p. 9), he is proud of his efficiency, manifested in his cargo and his piloting according to a precisely-plotted course -- an irony to which he is both blind and perceptive. Dispensing with philosophy ("You shouldn't make problems out of everything. That's for philosophers", p. 9), he decides on impulse to break the logic of the wheel and clock and to play the free-wheeling tourist. Willfully making a virtue of unreason ("no reason for it", p. 11), marked by a growing subjectivity, he passes near the "Portes de l'Enfer" (p. 10), to drive in the wilderness of Chibougamau Park like a madman dreaming he is a boy dreaming he is a pilot of a

spaceship. Following a meditation in a Chibougamau bar on the ironies of role-playing in civilization (his ironic vision betrays him into seeing himself as a spectator only, as he continues to perform as a wealthy sportsman), he becomes a drunken tourist in referent-free space ("It's no map up there, let me tell you", p. 22), where he decides, again on impulse, to abandon his course to Lac des Grises and to take a scenic tour north to Lake Mistassini -- a decision lacking the logic which would allow his rescuers to divine his probable location in the event of his being marooned ("They can't reconstruct my actions, they weren't logical", p. 132). By chance, a storm forces Morison to attempt an emergency landing on the return flight from Lake Mistassini to Lac des Grises. Striking submerged rocks, his craft sinks, abandoning Morison in an unknown governed by a logic which will require him "to see things from each new angle of vision" (p. 51).

His initial contact with the wilderness immerses him in a profound element of irony, where he immediately must learn the truth of swimming, dreaming, playing and living : "you stay up by staying down" (p. 38). Struggling to retain self-control and to avoid "engulfment" (p. 41) a mile or so from shore, he enters a cycle of sinking and surfacing, a cycle which lands him on a beach of gravel "ancient as the moon" (p. 48). Now marooned in space, he comes to learn that the wilderness both is and is not a playground. He learns that he must play the wheel of logic (using his watch as a compass), a game which also requires a knowledge of the cyclic logic of nature : darkness cancelling out light and light darkness. The cycle of the watch must be read as a mirror-image of the duration of endless time, which image allows Morison to fashion the illusion of referents in space : North is "a balancing act of relativity" (p. 63). "In the bush you go by time, not miles", as Morison speculates (p. 86). He must also play clock-logic to maintain self-control and must at once foster and dispel illusions with the "amulet" (p. 46) on his wrist ; to dispel the fatal illusion of a quick rescue, and to foster the life-giving illusion and, as it turns out, the truth, of hope. Reality in the bush is "an unchanging present" (p. 186) providing no bearings to man ; but, ironically, as perceived within, reality is chronological time and the bearings which that time, married to the cycle of nature governed by the sun, makes possible : "Only direction gave meaning to the wilderness" (p. 168). While becoming enlightened as to the endless vagaries and precisions of nature, in which "realities . . . cancel realities" (p. 60), he develops an indispensable oblique night-vision allowing him to perceive the irony of playgrounds : while they are "an imaginary

geometry" (p. 179), like a football field, used to create "the illusion of control" (p. 104), they are also the truth, the knowledge of which is essential to his survival: "Necessity made the absurd practical" (p. 169). The balancing act of relativity, in short, is made possible only by a fixed point of reference. Thus, while nature is a playground of boundless irony, it has no mercy on tourists feigning linear logic so that they may play at working in the bush. "Nature doesn't recognize holidays" (p. 52). Morison, as one who comes to know that when "thoughts . . . become feelings" it is "a time for mistakes" (p. 205), suspends his ironic vision in crises, to sustain the necessary truth and illusion of self-possession. Since "the playground has no manager" (p. 195), one must strive to work hard to retain one's bearings, though "every bearing is wrong" (P. 212).

And yet, the insight of this plain sense of nature (like the wilderness, Morison "was a center, everywhere, in fact centers, an infinity of them", p. 180) provides him with a truth veiled from those who have never actually been lost in the hell of a wilderness: that the play both is and is not the thing. Morison has come to know something of his roles, a knowledge tempered by an awareness (as experience, not merely as spectacle, as for students of "made-up aesthetics", p. 54) that his role of the efficient man is both a saving truth and a deception. While "certitude was unsuspected treachery" (p. 180), "the certitudes were tangible" (p. 221). The logic of this insight is a gift of nature and chance, and a payment of calculation. It is made possible in this "coded fiction" (p. 209) by Morison's initial loss of self-possession; and his survival by chance ("the very logic of it frightened him", p. 183) is made possible only by his calculation of time as a compass and by the sanity for which the watch provides an analogue. Like "an actor in control" (p. 116), Morison finally learns the truth of his role-playing and of the cyclic logic governed by and governing him. His early perception of the game of charting his position -- "A game. It was too artificial" (p. 114) -- tells but half the tale. The ironic relation of artifice and nature does not obviate sense: "Nobody" entered the wilderness "with nothing willingly, it was pointless, it would take a great deal of experience, and if you had that much experience you'd know enough not to try it" (p. 87). With but one's self as a point of reference, one is lost -- a point which might serve as a healthy admonition to writers and critics fond of narcissicism and quick to divest themselves of the cloth and baggage of civilization, without which, as even Carlyle acknowledges in **Sartor Resartus**, "mankind would sink to endless depths". In the world of

**Playground**, the logic of wheel and pavement and clock is not without some virtue : with chance, it is instrumental in allowing the wanderer's return from a hellish and enlightening odyssey : "I've . . . come to know . . . things" (p. 246). As a crewman on "spaceship earth" (pp. 63, **passim**) , Morison concludes that "clock and calendar were fantasies compared to his awareness" (p. 213) ; and he knows that it is good to be home : ". . . only purpose and destination made it tolerable" (p. 40).

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