# Seeking the Centre: Malcolm Ross

by Martin Ware

## I

Ex-students of Malcolm Ross who returned to see him at Dalhousie will remember an eager and impatient figure. He might be standing under the elms on Henry Street, or pacing the verandah of one of the old English Department houses, his blue eyes scanning in every direction. There was an unfailing warmth in his welcome. One was made to feel that one belonged to the extended family of his students, a network that reached to every province in Canada, and almost every continent on Earth. He had an extraordinary openness. He wanted to know all the news, and to learn of one's interests, preoccupations and projects, however strange and unusual (in my case, concerning literary tricksters of notable deviousness and deviancy). And he had much to tell of old friends, surprising stories, marvellous new writing.

I now know that during these visits, Malcolm Ross included us in the spirit of the special circle of his students, which had first developed in the years immediately after the second World War when he went to teach at the University of Manitoba. He often spoke of the Winnipeg years as extraordinary, as a time and place which was the "very heaven of possibility," where the landscape of the mind seemed to have no limits," where there was "not only a craving for creativity but also . . . a noble greed for the idea" (Ross, *The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions* 145-6). His students came from the North End, the South End (of Winnipeg), from prairie farms and villages, and their parents from the British Isles, from Russia, Hungary, the Ukraine," and other distant places (147). Some like Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman were young, scarcely out of their teens, while others were war-scarred veterans. Their inner allegiances might be Marxist, Jewish, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant . . ." (147). But they whole-heartedly shared in the journeys of imaginative and intellectual exchange and discovery. "There seemed to be no countries of the mind, no passports were needed or desired in journeys that overlooked and overleaped the frontiers of the political. Every spot seemed equidistant from eternity. Aristotle, Karl Marx, St. Thomas Aquinas, Spengler, T.S. Eliot and Milton were contemporaries of each of us, suspended in a perpetual

dialectic in which we could engage" (146). Together, as he wrote, his circle of students "constituted that multi-cultural and open community, that marvellous climate of the mind," which remained his dream and ideal throughout his life (147).

His capacity to bring people together of totally different backgrounds and divergent and sometimes opposing imaginative, intellectual, and religious perspectives was a crucial aspect of his leadership role in encouraging and developing, shaping and defining Canada through its cultural traditions (David Staines in Ross, *Impossible* 7). He has received well deserved recognition in defining a national Canadian literature (in spirit, international), and helping to create a mental climate conducive to the flourishing of ideas and discussion and the generating of artistic energies. Much has been said about his role in creating the new Canadian Library, which, more than any other publishing project, made the work of our country's writers available and accessible in every part of the country. Almost as much has been said about his creation of forums for the presentation of ideas and new creative work through his editorship of the *Queen's Quarterly* (1953-6) and through his organization of the memorable Canadian writers' conference at Kingston in the summer of 1955 (McGillivray 342). Attention has rightly been drawn to his vital editorial role in the publication of such landmark books as *Our Sense of Identity* (1954) and *The Arts in Canada* (1958).

What has received less attention than these contributions to literary nation-building has been the making of the core of inter-connected ideas—religious, imaginative, literary and intellectual—which energized, inspired, and directed all his efforts. Though these ideas—they were more than ideas—were 'the winged heels' of everything he did, he was often diffident about them, and reluctant to mention them too directly, perhaps out of respect for those who might not share them. As often as not, he approaches his ideas by indirection, and they are implicit in his study of the work of other writers and critics. Quite apart from their intrinsic interest, they are ideas, which, in our postmodern climate, we would do well to consider. He once wrote that the "task for us has always been to find the centre" (Ross, *Impossible* 91). In context, he is referring to a writer's struggle to discover a central vein of inspiration, an authentic voice and mode of expression. However, in the current postmodern climate, I am sure that he would smile on the use of the phrase to gently needle those who think that only the margins and tangents are of value, and that the height of critical achievement is to demystify an author's illusion of personal meaning. I like to think of him as raising an ironic eyebrow at the way so many of us

seem lost in the mazes of language, and I can almost hear his pronounced hiccup when I read critical comments which are based on the idea that there are no placental connections between our literary constructions and flesh and blood reality or the values that animate us. Perhaps he has a continuing role to play as the reader over our shoulders.

## II

Malcolm Ross always insisted that, for the writer, it was essential that "the idea be made flesh, flesh of our flesh" (Ross, *Impossible* 91). Conversely, his own most important ideas arose out of the flesh and blood reality of Fredericton, New Brunswick, the city of his childhood and young manhood, and a central point of reference in his imaginative life. His daughter Julie has written that Fredericton was the place "where his life long sense of family, community, democracy, social justice, and wit had its roots, as did his love of literature, inspired by his father, a man of literary ability" ("Obituary Notice," *Halifax Chronicle Herald* 22 Nov 2002). Though by the world's standards, Fredericton was a tiny city (with a population of little more than ten thousand), it was also a capital city, a university city, a cathedral city—a city of numerous private libraries where people like the Rosses took great pride in their home grown poets Charles and Thede Roberts, Bliss Carman and Francis Sherman (Chittick 243). By Ross's own account, his grandmother taught him to read while he was still crawling on the floor, he was reading novels when he was in grade one, and, while he was still at grade school, his home grown lettuce business financed his first purchase of a book of poetry, Bliss Carman's *Ballads and Lyrics* (Chittick 243; Ross, *Impossible* 43-4). His consuming love of books and enormous appetite for vigorous new writing was surely a joint gift of his immediate family and the Fredericton culture.

In Fredericton, the literary opened out in the natural world (the hills above the city where he used to hike and sled and toboggan) and the natural world poured its energy into the literary (as in Charles Roberts' animal stories). A.J.M. Smith has written: "Fredericton appears like an enchanted city, with its elm-shaded streets, its generously proportioned old homes, its cathedral and the college on the hill, while the broad rivers winding through the town and the wooded slopes behind bring the forests and an echo of the sea almost to the people's very doorsteps" (69). The echoes of the sea and Ross's own personal memories blend in his account of the influence of Bliss Carman. He remembers a childhood journey down the

river to the port city of Saint John, and his sight of "one of the grey ships," "square-rigged under full sail beating out beyond Partridge Island," and, in almost the same breath, he quotes Carman's lines about the fog banks, waiting to swallow such vessels, "Those tall navies of disaster / The pale squadrons of the fog / That maraud this grey sea border / Without pilot, chart, or log" (Ross, *Impossible* 44). And he added, "Carman was the river, the sea, the new air I breathed." He also shared Carman's passion for the forests—and the capacity to love the natural world "without fear" (if with a deep respect for its darker side). One can almost see young Malcolm walking in Carman's shoes when he quotes Charles Roberts' account "Carman trod the forest trails like an Indian, watchful, taciturn, moving with long loose-kneed slouch, flat footed with toes almost turned in rather than out (Ross, *Impossible* 51). The forest and the sea were so much a part of Carman's and Roberts' inner beings that it is sometimes hard to think of them as Fredericton men. But they, like Malcolm Ross, were members of a comparatively small and close-knit community.

Just as Ross partially derived his affinity for the natural world from the ethos of his home city's best writers, his city's culture blessed him with a very strong sense of the communal and the corporate, a sense that the best in our lives arises from what we receive from, and share and give to others, and that our individual lives are profoundly and principally affected by the character of the community to which we owe our main allegiance. This is an outlook which is profoundly different from American frontier individualism or the individualism of the New England transcendentalist. In Fredericton's case, as Alfred Bailey has explained, Fredericton's communal spirit ultimately went back to loyalist Toryism, and "the closely knit company of adepts in administration, education, and religion," who not only maintained the orderly and hierarchical pattern of society, but who fostered a real interest "in the things of the mind and spirit" (53, 54, 56). All his life, Ross, whose family by no means belonged to the establishment, acknowledged the positive side of this inheritance, but he also experienced the sterner side of Tory discipline. At about the time of his university graduation, he had been reading H.G. Wells (with his atrocious socialism) and Bertrand Russell (with his appalling religious scepticism) and had gone so far as to challenge compulsory soldiering (membership of the COTC) as a requirement of the Arts degree. Evidently, word of this reached the authorities, and it took many hours of debate before he was granted his degree (Chittick 246-7).

Ross's close friend Alfred Bailey speaks of the literary flourishing of Fredericton in late nineteenth century as four generations in the making

(56). Over these generations, the fierce spirit of loyalist puritanism was radically modified. It is Ross with his ironic temper of mind, his capacity to see sharply differentiated and overlapping traditions in a single sympathetic glance, who has given the best account of the way this modification took place. In his essay "A Strange Aesthetic Ferment," he points out that for many years there were two radically opposed elements in the Fredericton culture, the first principally American in spirit and deriving from austere puritan thinking, and the other arising from an English broadly Catholic spirit, particularly associated with the outgoing and aesthetic thinking of John Medley who served as Anglican Bishop of Fredericton for forty-seven years (1845-1892). The puritans had a deep suspicion of the order of nature and were devoted to purifying their churches of "any taint of the profane," or, for that matter, anything not explicitly authorized by scripture (Ross, *Impossible* 32). On the other hand, Bishop Medley and his numerous supporters and disciples wanted to reconcile the orders of nature and grace, and to transform the austere black and white world and "the prim white churches with square pews, galleries and black and white windows"—to fill the sacred places with beauty and music (32). In other words, Ross found in his own ancestral Fredericton a "collision of inheritances or opposites living in tension," phrases which are to recur in his criticism. The capacity to see opposites as complementary and not exclusive, and to see collision as potentially fruitful rather than destructive is a defining characteristic of Ross's irony, an irony which arose out of his knowledge of the community that nurtured him. The puritans had their discipline, their clarity of thought, their marvellous craftsmanship in "the shaping of fan windows and chippendale chairs" to offer, while the bishop opened their dark and repressed world to the imagination, to colour, and to the energy of the natural world.

The Bishop also offered a focal point for Fredericton, Christ Church Cathedral, which was built thanks to his initiative, energy and vision. "Fredericonians," Malcolm Ross writes, "whether they be Anglican or Roman, Baptist or Marxist, think first of their cathedral whenever they think of home" (Ross, *Impossible* 27). Just about his own first memory (he was only three or four years old) centres on a visit to his uncle's: "I saw a cluster of stars hanging in the sky between the cathedral and the legislative buildings. The cathedral was laced with starlight. I have never forgotten this sight" (Chittick 241-2). This glittering image stands at the centre of his thinking, as a token of something inexplicably mysterious in experience, which touches on his belief in the order of grace. An extremely important facet of his ironic or double vision is his unshakeable faith in an

intense, otherworldly source of energy, power and love, which at special moments pours itself into ordinary, frail, confused human beings, and gives an added beauty to the natural contours of forest, river and hill. He especially associated this otherworldly source of power with Christ Church Cathedral, "cruciform in dim religious light, pulsating with the music of Bishop [Medley's] own Te Deum" (Ross, *Impossible* 34). Ross learned from Medley to regard sacred places of beauty as sites where the two orders (of Nature and Grace) met. He followed Medley in believing that faith was strengthened and confirmed by human beings dedicating their love of beauty in nature through art and worship to the giver of these. Sacred places were the sites of a two way process: worship moved inwards and upwards, while the energies of faith, thus confirmed, had the effect of opening the church doors to the natural world.

This brings us to the fixed star, symbolically associated with the glittering image of the cathedral, around which Ross's thinking revolved—the incarnation. A belief in the incarnation is absolutely central, in his thinking, though it is one that those living outside religious traditions may wish to blink. I believe that Malcolm Ross would gently hope that there would be a willingness to reflect on his incarnational thinking, because the implications of it go beyond the purely religious. His thinking certainly challenges those who regard human beings as largely defined and confined by the constructions of language. He writes

> The fixed star at the centre of the Christian firmament of symbol is the dogma of the incarnation. In this dogma, respecting as it does both the divinity of the word and the humanity of the flesh, is contained the whole principle of the Christian aesthetic. Some of the implications of the dogma for art as well as for life are certainly these: though the flesh is frail, and though nature has received the wound of sin, the incarnation redeems the flesh and the world, laying nature and the reasonable faculty open once more to the operation of the supernatural. In other words, the incarnation makes possible, even demands the sacramental vision of reality. The flesh, the world, things, are restored to dignity, because they are made valid again.
>
> (Ross, *Poetry and Dogma* 10)

This is the kind of sacramental thinking which Bishop Medley had brought to Fredericton, and which he had made manifest in his renewal of catholic practice in Anglican worship (Ross, *Impossible* 34).

Sacramental thinking is a central aspect of Ross's irony, or inclusive double vision. To summarize his account, in the principal sacrament of the Eucharist, the enormous energy of love—the word—manifests itself in the

bread and wine, tokens of the natural world and of man's labour, which are made into "the humanity of the flesh." In other words, there is a merging of the order of grace (love, the word), with the order of nature (bread, wine, the flesh), with the result that growth and fulfillment become possible. Ross's irony here would be described as centering on the way the two elements, seemingly destined to separation, are brought together, releasing the energies of fusion, and might be described as "irony as a principle of growth," of a kind similar to the one we saw earlier, in his discussion of the fruitful collision of the Puritan and Medleian inheritances. His version of tragic irony would centre on "the principle of segregation" (A.S.P. Woodhouse's phrase) where the energies of grace (love) are split apart, "far apart" from the order of nature, often because of "dark notions of the "total depravity" of the natural order and natural man" (Ross, *Impossible* 32, 37).

The sentence in the passage quoted above regarding the incarnation which rings strongest and clearest in the present climate of literary studies, conditioned by theoretical thinking that tells us we live the truly human parts of our lives in an enormously differentiated web of language is "the flesh, the world, things are restored to dignity, are made valid again." In other words, sacramental thinking makes real, "valid", the natural world beyond the web of language; it makes real items like the rock kicked by Dr. Samuel Johnson, or creatures like eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart's beloved cat Jeoffrey. We live not in a world of linguistic "traces," but of real things, and symbolic literature, written in the spirit of sacramental thinking, through the warm inclusive power of the imagination, is capable of recapturing a sense of the thisness, the particularity of the real world and individual persons.

## III

Much of this thinking took root thanks to Ross's Fredericton background though it was to be deepened and clarified over the years. The move to Toronto for graduate studies (1933), which initiated a period of study, travel, and early ventures in university teaching (ending in 1942) led Ross to develop a stronger sense of the communal and corporate, and. through his study of the symbols, to establish the makings of his characteristic analogical thinking. The decisive event in setting the direction of Malcolm Ross's professional life occurred when Professor Malcolm MacPherson (his gifted English instructor at UNB) lent him a copy of the H.J.G. Grierson's *Cross Currents of Seventeenth Century Literature* (Chittick, 246).

Grierson whose edition of Donne (1912) had done so much to shape the modernist revolution in taste and poetry, wrote with engaging clarity and riveting trenchancy, and for Ross "the book was a very blaze of revelation" (Ross 1986, 184). Through Grierson's book, he was introduced to the currents of literary thought and achievement which were associated with the stirring events, which led to the English Revolution and so to the nexus of change and transformation in religious, literary, theatrical and political thinking, which had so much to do with the making of the modern world.

Grierson's book was exactly the right one to put in the hands of a student like Ross, who was Toronto bound. Grierson himself was very much aware of the University of Toronto as a centre for Milton studies, and was to acknowledge generously "the brilliant discrimination" of Toronto scholars such as A.S.P. Woodhouse and Arthur Barker in their studies of the Puritan Mind (Grierson, xv). Ross took to Milton studies with the greatest enthusiasm, but unlike his revered mentor, A.S.P. Woodhouse, while enraptured by the imaginative sweep of Milton's poetry, he was interested in putting a broadly Catholic, corporate and even Royalist (though not cavalier) stamp on his Milton scholarship. The Medley and Fredericton ideals of the ordered community show here, and this perspective foreshadows his later quest for a central focus for all Canada's disparate communities.

Though Ross wrote his doctoral dissertation, *Milton's Royalism* at Cornell (incidentally the university where Grierson had given the lectures which were the basis for *Cross Currents*), his initial supervisor was a Toronto man, Herbert Davis, and the critical approach adopted for the project reflects Ross's own life long interest in symbolism (Chittick 250). Ross's account centres on the way in Milton's work kingly and royalist symbols progressively lose their power to evoke a spirit of corporate unity and spiritual responsibility. He begins with a discussion of the functioning of symbols associated with the crown in Elizabethan England, and cites a series of passages to show how frequently in differing but parallel ways the crown functions symbolically to reflect the best, the most just and the most selfless yearning of representatives of each of several competing classes: yeomen, city merchants, courtiers (Ross, *Milton's Royalism* 7ff.). Ideal Kings like Shakespeare's *Henry V*, with his common touch, and Dekker's goodly King (in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*) are those who are able to resolve individual and class tensions (11, 25). In much Elizabethan writing "the king is a unifying symbol," in Wilson Knight's words "an order symbol, being both head and heart of the organic body of the state" (25). The symbol here functions in a way that Ross subsequently came to associate explicitly with analogy (and he later familiarized himself with St. Thomas

Aquinas' doctrine of analogy): the symbol carries different but parallel meanings in different contexts to different individuals, but in every case it embodies their connection to a not fully defined transcendent order. The symbol's function here is deeply rooted in medieval habits of mind so that for her contemporaries Elizabeth, Virgin Queen, Gloriana, evokes comparable feelings to those evoked by the Virgin Mary (Ross, *Milton's Royalism* 22). Even tragic Kings, like Lear and Richard II, despite their follies and failures, maintain a certain residual dignity, because they remain aware of the aura of kingship and, in Lear's case, that they are answerable to a higher power, and have a duty "to show the heavens more just" than men frequently are (Ross, *Milton's Royalism* 26).

Ross recognizes Milton's debt to the spirit of Elizabethan England: "for a few brief but extremely important and impressionable years, Milton felt something of the first careless rapture of the Elizabethans (45). And he explores Milton's strangely long continued fascination with the splendor of the Arthurian legend and the idealized monarchy of British mythology. However, he conclusively shows that by the time Milton wrote his major poems (beginning with "Lycidas") he had lost any sense of the crown and associated symbols being capable of evoking the unitary power they had in Elizabethan times. Progressively royalist symbols are degraded in his work, being associated, for example, with the pretensions of Satan or the vengeful power of an angry God (114-5). At the same time, he sometimes, almost unconsciously, uses the symbols in a traditional way. Ross points to the imaginative contradiction at the heart of Milton's use of symbols by saying that "one set of traditional values attached to the symbols is in sharp contradiction with another." He finally concludes that in Milton's greatest poem, *Paradise Lost* the "Royalist symbol suggests no value except power" (Ross, *Milton's Royalism* 112).

Ross's view is that the Royalist symbol almost entirely disappears in Milton's final works (*Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*) and so does Milton's hope for "man within the limits of history and society" (139). These two are not necessarily connected, but taken together, they mean that in the final years there is an analogical void at the heart of Milton's thinking. There is no common symbolic pattern capable of unifying competing groups and individuals, resolving their tensions, and linking them to their common humanity and their spiritual hope. In other words, Milton has lost touch with the historical order and what Ross calls "the historical concrete"—or the possibility that spiritual energies might be a moving force in history.

## IV

At just the time that Ross was writing about this void in Milton's thinking, Canadians were discovering that their country might have a significant place in history. Involvement in the second World War meant that Canadians were travelling on a scale not seen before, and discovering the vastness, complexity, and diversity of their country. One man who was deeply fascinated by the country's ethnic diversity was the Scot John Grierson, the second Grierson to play a role in Ross's life, a man whom Ross described as "the first thoroughgoing Canadian I ever knew" (Ross, *Impossible* 156). As Commissioner of the National Film Board, Grierson was in a position to give Ross a job, and, on the strength of a vigorous conversation about Milton and his levelling contemporaries, he did so. Ross's job enabled him to get "a real sense" of the country for the first time, for he travelled thousands of miles, back and forth across the country setting up a film distribution network, meeting "farmers, business people, artists, writers and film makers," "Slavs of the prairies . . . Jews of Winnipeg . . . Manitoba Icelanders and the British Columbia Chinese" (McGillivray 339). His first hand experience enabled him to identify profoundly with Grierson's desire in his documentaries "to reflect and present to the Canadian people the cultural individuality of the many peoples of Canada" (Ross, *Impossible* 156). While working from a starting point of biculturalism (and a strong acknowledgment of the French culture of Quebec and elsewhere), Grierson insisted that "no fragment of our diverse heritage should be lost or obscured or melted down" (156). Ross acknowledges Grierson's primary role in making him aware of "the continuous open dialectic of our nation-making," that is the process of interplay, accommodation, conflict, and mutual influence between sharply differentiated cultural and ethnic groups, which began to create a common consciousness and a corporate identity (156).

Ross's move to Winnipeg—the geographical centre of Canada—and to the University of Manitoba in 1945 confirmed much that he had learned from Grierson and from his experience with the National Film Board. During his five years in Winnipeg, he felt blessed to encounter a generation of gifted and eager students ("brilliance was in the blood"), who were drawn from an extraordinary variety of ethnic, ideological and religious backgrounds (Chittick 255). Through his Manitoba students, the diverse communities that he had encountered on his travels were presented in microcosm. He thus had a close-up view and was personally involved in "the open dialectic" of literary discovery and indirectly of "our nation-

making", at a personal level. His students' "noble greed" for the idea and the eagerness with which they entered into the search for common ground intensified his own personal search for the source of our common humanity, "deepening . . . his religious sense" and "beginning . . . a serious concern with theology" (Chittick 255).

It would be easy to romanticize the Winnipeg years, and it is true that Ross saw them as opening up the very heaven of possibility (Ross, *Impossible* 145). But both by personal inclination and religious and philosophical conviction, he was a stern realist, who never lost sight of the historical concrete. He never forgot that his students belonged to a war generation and that their and their parents' lives began in "the seed plot of human agony and human hope," or to borrow Yeat's phrase "in the foul rag and bone shop of the human heart" (for Canadians, this is perhaps located in Christy Logan's nuisance grounds) (Ross, *Impossible* 146; Laurence, *passim*). Many of his students were all too aware of the painful nature of their conflicting inheritances—pioneer Canadian, Jewish, Russian, Hungarian, Ukranian, and it was natural that tensions should arise between them. They did not find it easy to voice their individual perspectives to one another. He particularly remembered an evening when students of British, Jewish, Hungarian and Icelandic descent were discussing the complexities of the Freudian interpretation of a contemporary American novel. There was tension, "wariness, even an uneasiness at first," but eventually "a little miracle of intercession, interchange and excited communion" (Ross, *Impossible* 157). What was exciting to Ross was the way students were able to enter other traditions than their own and to take energy from them in such a way as to define more vigorously their own imaginative impulses and at the same time, to feel part of a larger world. A case in point was his student, Adele Wiseman. She was as much at home in writing about the Catholic symbolism of Gerard Manley Hopkins as in writing a story about the Jewish life she knew in North End Winnipeg (157). Her personal voice and perspective took added strength from the encounter with the other.

The term which Ross uses again and again to describe the process of mutual discovery in which his students were engaged is 'the dialectic', a word meaning for Ross, among other things, the fruitful collision of opposed perspectives. Thinking of this kind prompted him to say that Canadians are people of "the second thought" (Ross, *Our Sense of Identity* ix). The reality of living in a country, originally bilingual and bicultural, which is now multicultural (more multicultural than ever since Pierre Trudeau's changes to the Immigration Act in the late sixties), entails the growth of an "ironic" habit of mind, initially a dual irony in the earlier

phase (ix), and now a multidimensional irony (Ross, *Impossible* 154-5). This is the kind of habitual ironic awareness which lies "coiled like a spring", "the inescapable response to the pressure and presence of opposites in tension," which intensifies a writer's sense of her own perspective, and enlarges her sense of the other (Ross, *Our Sense* ix). This is surely the master irony in Ross's thinking—irony as a principle of growth, the generous habit of mind which involves acceptance of a Canadian community of difference which "opens out into the community of man"—in other words, a nationalism to end all nationalisms.

The years of learning with John Grierson and with his Manitoba students had brought Ross to the point of crystallizing his conception of the Canadian community, ordered like the Fredericton of his early years, growing, organic, but exponentially more complex:

> We are a uniquely structured community. As individuals we live by various separate ethnic and spiritual inheritances. We preserve these differences. At another level, as Canadians, we take out cultural life from the lively collision and interplay of many inheritances. Thus we grow. (Ross, *Impossible* 122)

It is the art of irony to translate this lively collision and interplay into art and language, which is, to borrow a phrase from Linda Hutcheon, "relational, inclusive, and differential" (Hutcheon 66). Ross was not only one of the first to point out the way Canada's unique cultural and social structure produces an ironic habit of mind, but also the extent of its dazzling variety in our literature . . . "cosmic irony, social irony . . . religious irony." He notes as exemplars Morley Callaghan, Mordecai Richler, Adele Wiseman, E.J. Pratt, Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood and others (Ross, *Impossible* 154). He had a special admiration for the Montreal Jewish poet Irving Layton ("in no Canadian writer is the mode of irony so complex, so many faceted as in the work of Irving Layton") (154-5). And he himself was to write a brilliant account of religious irony in the "Introduction" to Morley Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*, and an incisive account of the irony of human character in his preface to Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. In this, as in much of his writing, we see the particular quality of his most typical irony, inspired by a penetrating sympathy, which is exactly what he sees in Leacock's sketches. "Leacock," he writes, "loves what he hates . . . he just can't help it." Ross adds "to attack and defend, to love and to hate in one breath, is not the genius of satire, but the genius of irony, the subtler art, the deeper wisdom" (95). In his thinking here, his ideas are close to those of Leacock, who once wrote "the really great humour is based on a picture of human life, in

which the universal element of imperfection—alike in all ages and places—excites at once our laughter and our tears" (Leacock 189).

## V

Relating the ironic mode to the universal tends to be problematic in Canada, where the ironic habit of mind has arisen out of a strong sense of difference, which is sharpened in the interplay with the "other." At the same time, a discriminating and sympathetic sense of the other is a central characteristic of the Canadian 'cosmopolitan' outlook, a habit of relating one's culturally or ethnically specific perspective to the larger cultural pattern or to universal concerns. This aspect of typically Canadian thinking is well illustrated in Ross's review of Abraham Klein's *Second Scroll*, "novel, travel book, personal memoir, history-biography of the Jew as wanderer, confession of faith and work of love" (Marshall 89-91, 75). Eminent Jewish critics such as Allen Mendelbaum and Harvey Swados have tended to see Klein's work as an exploration of the Jewish condition, written for their own community as a contribution to a specifically Jewish culture in America. In Maurice Samuel's words: "the literary idiom of [this] Jewish culture is in the process of creation in *The Second Scroll*" (Marshall 87-8). Ross on the other hand, bringing his Canadian cosmopolitan thinking to bear, insists that "the author's Canadianism is a nodal point in his treatment of his theme" (Marshall 87-8). He argues that "Klein has come close to creating the archetypal Canadian pattern, a dense organic fusion of traditional idiom, ancient myth and cult, the contrapuntal dialectic of our English-French relationship, the sophisticated technical reach of man alive in this age, in whom all ages are alive" (90). The implication of Ross's comments is not only that the mythic and archetypal design appeals more effectively to readers outside the Jewish tradition than a realistic strategy would. He also suggests that the archetypal pattern of the personal "odyssey," "the quest," with the inevitable associations with James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (both known to have influenced Klein), widens the reference of Klein's specifically Jewish focus so that, though Jewish readers are those principally addressed, every reader can associate with the "purgatorial" journey towards "the Earthly Paradise of the New Jerusalem, even to the prospect of the universal and the eternal (90).

One reads *The Second Scroll* with a constant awareness of patterns of parallel, parallels with comparable quest works outside the Jewish tradi-

tion, and parallels within the aesthetic structure of Klein's work. Ross describes Klein's method as "that of analogy," which means, among other things here, "the patterning of diverse and seemingly discontinuous facts of experience" (90). This parallel patterning shapes the discrete strands of the book's development: the personal, the communal and the spiritual. That is the narrator's search for his revered Uncle Melech, the Jewish people's historical longing for the establishment of the State of Israel, and the spiritual yearning of the narrator (representing every man) for the discovery of the Messiah and the new Jerusalem. The trajectory of the narrator's quest follows the pattern of the journeying of the people of Israel towards the promised land as laid out in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers (which provide Klein with his chapter headings). The culminating hope at each level of Klein's book is for fundamental transformation, for the attainment of a new state of being. It is this connection between reality and hope, between what Ross would call the historical order and the order of grace, which lies at the heart of his analogical thinking. He sees analogical thinking, the analogical method as open to writers of almost any religious or philosophical tradition. This is what causes him to say at the conclusion of his review of Klein's book that "it is not the item, but the pattern which is Canadian" (91).

## VI

At much the same time that he was reviewing the *Second Scroll*, Ross published *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century Poetry* (1954). His attention is directed in this book at the damaging effects of protestant revisions of Eucharistic dogma on the "analogical mode of the poetic symbol." Ross says that this book grew out of his teaching, specifically "his seventeenth century course at Manitoba," and it certainly reflects the 'dialectical' spirit of the Winnipeg years (Chittick 255). In a number of ways, the book is reflective of Ross's general outlook. This is because the book's method, while encompassing new criticism, theological criticism and traditional historical criticism, is dialectical. Ross defines a strong religious and intellectual perspective of his own (in contemporary terms, defines his own interpretive community), and explores the work of seventeenth-century poets in the light of this perspective. He is quite explicit about what he calls "my own assumptions" (Ross, *Poetry and Dogma* 16). Accordingly, it is possible to gather from a close reading of the book a clear picture of Ross's "fundamental position," "the

ground of his criticism," his stance towards existence, which lies at the heart of his literary and critical endeavours (for the source of the phrases, see Ross, *Impossible* 126). Let me lay out the main elements of this stance.

First, his thinking is ontological, rooted in a philosophy of being, and emphatically not in any philosophy which exclusively centres on man, man's psychology, any web of language, or any self-contained literary universe of mythic archetypes spun off by the unconscious mind. For Ross the three orders of being—natural, historical and divine—are distinct, though they participate one in the other. At either end of the spectrum human knowledge fails: human beings cannot fully know either the divine or the natural order, though we respect what we cannot fully know. We can only gain some inkling about the order of the divine through analogical symbols, which ultimately convey a sense of mystery because these are the symbols "behind which we cannot see" (Edwyn Bevan, quoted in Ross 1954 26). Ross's version of ontological thinking involves an attitude of humility, and means that no religious group, no philosophic sect, no school of criticism can have exclusive ownership of the truth, a view congenial to the kind of community of difference which Ross believes Canada to be. Ross's fundamental thinking causes him to be dismayed by the radical humanism of Northrop Frye and his positing "a verbal universe, created by the imagination out of the raw stuff of nature and event, meant to be a mighty paradigm of all human hope and deed" (Ross, *Impossible* 132). As he says: "there on the page is the spectacle of a religion being swallowed whole by an aesthetic, and it is no more credible than the spectacle of Jonah swallowing the whale" (134).

As we discussed earlier, Ross's fixed star is the dogma of the incarnation. The divine energy of love (the word) enters into time at a particular historical moment, taking on human flesh and embracing the human and the natural, which in their raw state exist outside the circle of love, in a condition traditionally described as fallen. The incarnation validates the real particulars of the life of human beings and natural creatures in time. What is more the incarnation establishes a pattern, repeated in the sacraments, whereby the energy of the love again and again becomes active in the lives of the participants and in the orders of nature and history. Inevitably this perspective opens the hearts of those who accept it to a deep sympathy with the natural world and natural processes (however lethal they may sometimes be). It places Ross's thinking at the opposite pole to that of such distinguished writers as Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye. Frye refers to Canadians' "terror of soul" at "Nature's apparently meaningless power to waste and destroy on such a superhuman scale which suggests an equally

ruthless or subconscious God or else no God." (Frye 138). Atwood refers to Nature the Monster as either "dead or actively hostile to man" (Atwood 49). Ross regarded these ideas as veering dangerously close to "the dark notions of the total depravity of the natural order" which he had discerned in the fierce outlook of North American puritanism. He himself preferred to regard the world not with "terror of soul," but in the way the Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar once saw it.

> When she looked out from the spacecraft and saw from afar the plant earth, she was suffused with a sudden rush of awe and love. For the first time she saw her home, not just Canada, but all of it—the whole world was her home. All of it. (Bentley 7)

This type of visionary experience is what is translated into literature through the analogical symbol, the most important feature of Ross's analogical outlook. Analogical thinking, he believed, provided "a poetic knowledge of the participation (each in the other) of the natural, historical and divine orders," which was threatened and lost in the seventeenth century, and in part restored by T.S. Eliot and other major writers in the twentieth (Ross, *Poetry and Dogma* vii, 231). Perhaps the ideas implicit in Ross's analogical thinking can best be explained to a contemporary reader with reference to Yann Martel's recent novel, *Life of Pi* (2001). Martel's protagonist Pi, a Hindu, has encounters with a Catholic priest and a Moslem baker, which cause him to wish to be a Hindu, a Christian and a Moslem all at the same time (76). Pi has been astonished by what he has learned in both encounters, but particularly by what he learns from the priest. "Their religion had one story and to it they came back again and again. It was story enough." As a Hindu, he can scarcely believe the essence of the story's drama, that a God would allow himself to be humiliated, "stripped naked, whipped, mocked, dragged through the streets, and at the hands of mere mortals" (59). He asks "why not leave death to mortals? Why make dirty what is beautiful, spoil what is perfect? The priest's answer, "love" is always the same (60). This is where we see what Ross means by "the participation each (in the other) of the cultural, the historical and the divine orders"—the exemplar of the divine tortured in the dirt of human cruelty, the face of love defaced and spoiled on the cross, and out of it all a new spirit emerging. The pattern is repeated in countless stories—tragic and comic, sublime and ridiculous, realistic and fantastic, but all illuminated by the one story, "which is story enough." The literary item in this context is Christian, but the analogical pattern encapsulating the collision of two

orders of being is to be found in many belief systems and in many forms of literature, and is appropriate to an open culture.

Ross regarded the analogical thinking found in literature as a way into "the meaning, the mystery, the tragedy and the far promise of a real and redeemable human condition" (Ross, *Impossible* 146). For him, however, redemption and fulfillment were never purely private or individual, though they were always personal. Human beings, he believed, realize and fulfill themselves "not in spite of society, but through it" by committing themselves to "the corporate active way of life." He fervently hoped that writers and artists would "recover the corporate sense" so that they might play a role in allaying the contemporary "disease of alienation" (Ross, *Poetry and Dogma* 251). His outlook here goes back in part to the close-knit Fredericton community of his boyhood, in part to his experience with his Manitoba students. It also owes a good deal to his mature religious thinking and to his reflections on the Eucharist. He believed that "the mass is corporate," that the participants in it are made one in "the unity of the mystical body" and that this experience of becoming members one of another precedes "all individual spiritual benefits" (36). From this religious basis, his corporate thinking widens to to take in "the living community" immediate to the individual, then to the larger community, and then to the community of communities, "the multicultural and open community" of his dreams, held together by the generous inclusive ironic habit of mind, and making possible "the lively collision and interplay of many inheritances."

## VII

I am sure that Malcolm Ross would have been the first to recognize that the main elements of his outlook were more likely to challenge than to confirm some of the strongest trends in current literary thinking. Nothing would please more than for his thinking to create a degree of dialectical tension in his readers, causing them to take pause and think more intensively about their own assumptions.

Of course in a number of respects, he anticipates post-modern ideas. He had a very decided conviction that a reader must know her own perspective (in Fish's terms, her own interpretive community), and that this perspective had a large bearing on the extent of a reader's capacity to appreciate a work. He was a scrupulous respecter of difference (though not the linguistic theory of difference, to which Derrida refers). And his belief in the fruitful collision of many inheritances anticipates in some respects

Stephen Greenblatt's ideas about the circulation of social energy (which is such a cardinal aspect of cultural criticism) (Greenblatt 449). He also had a great respect for Robert Kroetsch,—"the most daring and yet the most responsible of our post-modern critics"—who "has not despaired of locating meaning and even purpose in an order external to his own imaginings" (Ross, *Impossible* 201). He was particularly intrigued by Kroetsch's style, the use of "parody, ingenious and sometimes baffling syntax, involuted and convoluted narrative schemes, . . . words that are colloquial and in every sense vulgar ... to achieve a fresh and valid realism" (201).

His sympathy for some of the practitioners and practice of post-modernism notwithstanding, he could never follow its more radical representatives all the way. He believed strongly that the highest forms of literature present a picture of human experience, grounded in palpable reality, informed by a sense of value, and given body by the revealing of a complex social world, in which the protagonist finds or fails to find fulfilment.

I am sure that he would want a continuing dialogue with today's writers and critics. My guess is that the following three questions are among those that he would like to address to them.

1. Do we really have to be manacled to the way of conceptualizing language, inspired by Derrida and DeSaussure? Or are there other ways open to us of theorizing language, particularly the language of artistic expression?

2. Are there not ways of escaping from the self-referential web of language, and conceptualizing a new form of realism, a new way of conceiving of the connections between our literary constructions and the actual tangible world experienced by human beings in their own time and place?

3. Are there not ways of escaping the binds imposed on us by our obsession with the dangers of appropriation? Is there not a way of distinguishing destructive appropriation from the constructive exploration of another ethnic or cultural groups's imaginative world in a spirit of mutual exchange?

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