ROBERT MURRAY DAVIS

Everything Old/New Is New/Old Again: The Fiction of Russell Smith

Russell Smith began a career as a Canadian novelist not by embracing what he terms the usual subjects of canoes, the prairie, and sad women but by writing about the glittering and the would-be glittering art and music scene of Toronto in the vein of the early Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis, first as a journalist and then in fiction that is increasingly accomplished. Like the young Waugh, Smith participates in the world that he chronicles, but he also stands far enough away to see its absurdities. His commitment to literature indicates that he will find material at any age and in any scene.

PETER DICKINSON

Derek McCormack: In Context and Out

This essay considers the local and national literary contexts of Derek McCormack's writing and then argues that his work is more productively analysed within a literary-critical genealogy of international queer writing. Reframed in this context, the "perverted" Peterborough elaborated in McCormack's oeuvre is discussed alongside similar sexual/textual spaces created by Tennessee Williams, Christopher Isherwood, Gertrude Stein, and Alfred Kinsey.

TAMAS DOBOZY

Lhasa Unlimited: The Metaphysics of Death in Steven Heighton's *The Admen Move on Lhasa* and "Translations of April"

Steven Heighton's *The Admen Move on Lhasa* and "Translations of April" attempt to reconcile themselves with a lost, stable essence through meditations on language and death. Throughout, Heighton's work attempts to grasp momentarily what Maurice Blanchot calls "naïve existence" or at least to examine the process whereby consciousness continually fails to apprehend anything but itself in the act of attempting apprehension. Tracing the negation of naïve existence embodied in the act of meaning, Heighton's work elegizes and thereby memorializes an essential, vital reality.

ALLAN HEPBURN

"Enough of a Wonder": Landscape and Tourism in Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*

A historical novel about the settling of Alberta, *Icefields* reconsiders discourses of tourism, property, and nature. As a trope for the limitations of time and space, the Arcturus Glacier, something of a "time-machine," transforms objects and people that fall into it. Temporal and spatial boundaries define an ecology for the novel, in which nothing disappears permanently and everything gets recycled. What is lost returns, often in a transformed, wondrous state. Wonder, as a postmodern effect in *Icefields*, renews vision and challenges tourists' habits of seeing nature as a packaged, sublime, ready-for-market phenomenon.

Derek McCormack: In Context and Out

PETER DICKINSON

THIS PAPER SEEKS TO LOCATE Derek McCormack's writing within a continuum of queer literary and cultural production from the 1920s to the present. It also seeks, in part, to account for and explain my own evolution as a gay reader and critic increasingly attuned to intertextual and comparative frameworks whose affiliative spaces are articulated across and through a poetics of *sexual* rather than *national* difference. To this end, while my analysis begins by locating McCormack's work first within the local literary milieu of contemporary Toronto and next within a specifically Canadian context of gay writing, it soon moves outward from there to demonstrate how his work might simultaneously and even more hospitably be examined within a literary-critical genealogy of *inter-* or *trans-*national queer writing. It is here, within this latter context, that the careful reader begins to see how Gertrude Stein, Tennessee Williams, Christopher Isherwood, and Alfred Kinsey, among others, emerge as important queer influences on McCormack's fictional oeuvre.

At heart, however, this paper is an extended fan letter. It gushes, it waxes, it extols. McCormack is a writer whose work I greatly admire, and it deserves to be better known in his own country and in what he himself, in the deliberately affected period idiom of his prose, would no doubt call "abroad."

This is not to say that the author of *Dark Rides: A Novel in Stories* (1996), *Halloween Suite* (1998), *Wild Mouse* (1998, coauthored with Chris Chambers and nominated for a 1999 Toronto Book Award), and, most recently, *Wish Book: A Catalogue of Stories* (1999) doesn't already have legions of fans like me, devotees — many of them fellow writers — who rhapsodize about his spare, minimalist style, the historical accuracy of his cultural references, the thoughtful and intricate design of each of his texts. In this country's popular literary consciousness, however, his "notoriety"

probably has as much to do with the fact that he dared to diss Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* in the pages of the *Globe and Mail* as it does with the quality of his prose. The resulting furor saw angry readers confronting McCormack at his place of work, Book City on Bloor Street (conveniently noted in the article), many of them threatening physical harm.

McCormack made his remarks about Michaels as part of a multiauthor interview with Alexandra Gill. The other interviewees included Andrew Pyper, Russell Smith, and Evan Solomon, each with a new high-profile, major-press release (respectively, *Lost Girls*, *Young Men*, and the utterly execrable *Crossing the Distance*) to tout alongside McCormack's more modest *Wish Book*. One of these writers is definitely not like the others, and Gill seized upon this difference, stressing that McCormack is "probably the least recognized of the group," that he is the small-press experimentalist, and that he is the "gay, sensitive one," noting, in this regard, that he alone among the group arrived with a present for birthday-boy Solomon. She even commented on McCormack's clothes (jeans and a shirt), if only to contrast them with the expensive cuts and clean lines of the Prada and Armani suits worn by Pyper, Smith, and Solomon, whose extraliterary personae of lawyer, fashion columnist, and television host make McCormack's aforementioned day job look like chump change indeed. I have commented elsewhere (in an article on Michael Turner, who was approached by Gill as a possible interview subject and wisely declined) on the full extent of Gill's marginalization of McCormack and his work (see "Michael's Turn"). I would only add here that in voicing his assessment of Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* McCormack articulated a position that many of us had long harboured toward the novel and the whole "poetic" school of prose writing at McClelland and Stewart.

In fact, only two and a half weeks after McCormack's public evisceration at the hands of Gill, the *Globe and Mail* published an arts op/ed piece by Newfoundland writer Kenneth J. Harvey largely endorsing McCormack's position on the high lyricism of Michaels's novel. In the article, Harvey decries the "pervasively sentimental style," fostered mostly under Ellen Seligman's editorial management, that he claims has overtaken Jack McClelland's once-revered publishing house. "What ground-breaking work of fiction has Ellen Seligman edited lately?" Harvey opines, asserting that he "cannot name one." He then continues:

> The courageous mavericks have been replaced by Seligman's stable, best referred to as The Eloquent Elite. Seligman has nurtured some brilliant writers: Michael Ondaatje, Elyse Gasco, Anne Michaels and Nino Ricci, to name but a few. Yet these authors — though they deal with different experiences and situations — write from a similar sensibility, one of poignancy and restraint. These are the Gifted Poets Turned Gifted Novelists. They lack honest human coarseness.

Such "coarseness," I have come to discover, McCormack's work has in abundance. Like the itching powder made from armpit hair and pubes in the opening story of *Wish Book*, his writing first pricks and then slowly finds its way under your skin. There it festers into a scab, and even though you know better you cannot help worrying it into a larger abscess. Infection, contagion, contamination, as we shall see at greater length below, are metaphors that recur in McCormack's work, and they aptly describe the experience of reading it. One comes away from it feeling unsettled but somehow feverish for more.

Such recent brushes with Toronto's media firmament notwithstanding, to read McCormack is somehow to feel part, however tangentially, of a different kind of elite, or perhaps anti-elite, club. I am referring to a network of talented small-press and magazine writers, artists, designers, editors, and publishers, most of whom live and work in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood and are affiliated, in one way or another, with *Taddle Creek*, a literary magazine founded in 1997 by editor-in-chief Conan Tobias as a showcase for Annex writers before switching to a Toronto-wide publishing policy three years later.[1] Take, for example, Ian Phillips, publisher of Pas de Chance Press and illustrator of McCormack's *Wish Book*. So in demand are his designing talents, and such is his international reputation among discerning bibliophiles for the handmade 'zines, story and poetry chapbooks, and art books that he produces, that even established writers "have been known to cold-call Pas de Chance, hoping Phillips and his tiny press will produce their next book" (Curtis). In the case of McCormack, however, it was the designer who sought out the writer, Phillips having become a fan after reading *Dark Rides*. What resulted was the limited edition *Halloween Suite*, a collection of four thematically linked stories lavishly illustrated and exquisitely bound in orange felt and hand-flocked rice paper, each with a smiling jack-o'-lantern branded onto

the cover and a mock Peterborough Public Library borrower card tucked in among the endpapers. The collaboration, both in the slightly menacing tenor of the stories and drawings and in the period specificity of its setting in small-town, Depression-era Ontario, presaged similar themes taken up on a larger scale in *Wish Book*.

Phillips prints only a single copy at a time of each of his published books and only upon request. So you really need to know someone who knows him in order to obtain a copy. I received mine as a gift from my friend Emily. It was also Emily who secured for me a copy of the gorgeously designed *Wild Mouse* (more photos of midway rides and fairground crowds, this time from the Canadian National Exhibition Archives and with the titles and authors' names embossed in black-and-white serif type on a bright red cover), having shared for a time office space with that book's publisher, Beth Follett, of Pedlar Press. However, only when I proposed an earlier version of this essay to Helen Walsh, then the managing editor of the *Literary Review of Canada*, did I discover the true extent of the McCormackian network. For, in e-mailing me her thoughts on the project, she disclosed that she was at that moment in preproduction on a film by Jason McBride, frequent dedicatee of McCormack's work and director of the powerful 1998 short *Stargaze*, based on the haunting central story from *Dark Rides*.

You'll forgive me, then, if in what follows I claim something more than the fan's standard privilege of "connection" with the author, six degrees of separation having in this case been reduced to no more than two. I am certain that one of these days McCormack and I will meet (indeed, we've already corresponded). In the meantime, I have taken it upon myself to elucidate to his "public" some of the larger, extra-Toronto, literary and cultural contexts in which I see his so-called small books participating.

* * *

I first became acquainted with Derek McCormack's writing while working on the "Gay Fiction" and "Gay Drama" entries included in the second edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. The undertaking required a crash course in reading (I was given only three weeks to complete my essays), and it was while perusing the shelves at Little Sister's in Vancouver one fine May afternoon that I came across McCormack's debut novel, *Dark Rides*. Having just made my way through all 383 pages of Patrick

Roscoe's *The Lost Oasis*, I sighed with relief over the relative slimness of the spine of *Dark Rides* (indeed, I first mistook the novel for an improperly filed volume of poetry). Fanning the pages, I noted the period photos (buzzed and T-shirted boys in front of midway rides, farm equipment, urinals), the clipped, verbless sentences, their staccato rhythm. I paused over the book's subtitle: *A Novel in Stories*. Having also just recently reread Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories*, I thought that I spotted a Gay Canadian Literary Trend.

I was only partly wrong, as Allan Hepburn independently confirms in his own contribution to *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* when he links the McCormack and Selvadurai texts with Wayson Choy's similarly structured *The Jade Peony* (see Hepburn 847–48). While one might argue that the three interlocking sections of Choy's novel are akin more to Jamesian *nouvelles* (especially in their length and explicit foregrounding of point of view) than to short stories in any traditional sense, and, indeed, that McCormack's own "snapshot fiction" resists such easy classification from the other end of the narrative spectrum, it is precisely this troubling of genre, and the "gender troubling" that accompanies it, that provide some continuity between the three texts. The interconnected "stories" in each novel add up to a cumulative portrait of adolescent identity formation (and especially the discontinuous links between sexual and ethnic identity in the cases of Selvadurai and Choy) in specific times and places; at the same time, the silences and gaps between the stories point to the fact that this portrait will never be complete or whole.

In the case of McCormack, however, there are at least two important differences. First, the text's narrative cropping finds a visual corollary in his strategic use and ex-centric placement of photographs throughout *Dark Rides*. Culled from various archives around southwestern Ontario (the *London Free Press* Collection, the Peterborough Agricultural Society, the Carousel Society of the Niagara Frontier), they themselves archive a bygone era of mythic masculinity, the 1950s (references to male icons such as Charles Atlas, Hank Williams, and Victor Mature, for whom the term "beefcake" was invented, abound), the photographic representation of which runs counterpoint to the portraits of gay, or nonnormative, desire documented by the prose. Which may explain why none of the photographs in the book is centred in the middle of the page. The juxtaposition of text and image, in this case, is meant to be just

that: juxtapositional, disruptive, defamiliarizing, emphasizing precisely the *lack* of correspondence, the *skewed* relationship, between the theory and the practice of gender and sexuality.

Second, whereas the essential naïveté and guilelessness of Selvadurai's and Choy's child narrators make them ideal focalizers, expansively documenting — if not always understanding — the explosive transformations that they witness in their families, their communities, and their own bodies, the narrator of *Dark Rides* is no wide-eyed ingénue. Older, if not necessarily wiser, Derek McCormack's Derek McCormack (cheeky, I remember thinking in Little Sister's, but not without literary precedent, as we shall see) is more distant and removed, both a participant in and a shrewd observer of the strange configurations of his sexual development. This dual perspective manifests itself in a detached narrative voice that occasionally borders on the scientific or clinical; it is a voice that, like McCormack's own prose style, edits rather than editorializes, as in the following scene of seduction that concludes the book's first story:

> His pecker was jerking itself upright. Blue veins, green veins, veins the colour of red cabbage. I put the end of it in my mouth. Horses snorting below. Then he lifted my head and rolled on top of me and started rubbing his body against mine. His forehead dripping into my eyes. (13)

This penchant for self-voyeurism, for being at once in the moment and outside it, watching (reinforced in part through the device of the eponymous narrator), reminds me of the pre-postcolonial Roscoe, the Roscoe of *Birthmarks*, to be precise, a 1988 collection of linked stories and prose fragments that also reads much like a novel, in which the narrator, a male prostitute variously named Richard, Rickie, Rick, and Reeves, spends a lot of time looking at others as well as himself:

> I am still and calm as a pool of water upon which a reflection lies clear and perfect. My face in the glass changes as I change to go outside. My skin tightens, my mouth hardens, my eyes narrow.
>
> Who will appear in the mirror? Rickie? Rick? Reeves? (82)

McCormack's and Roscoe's narrators are marked as different, both emotionally and physically, and their constant scrutiny of their

bodies for physiological signs of that difference (in the form of scars, sores, scales, and wounds) is an attempt, in part, to see what others see and register in them. They do so not out of any sense of self-pity but purely out of a desire to know (empirically?) and thereby name (in theory?) who they are.

In the spirit of labelling, then, I would classify McCormack and Roscoe as part of a younger generation of male homosexual writers in Canada whose work is arguably more "queer" than "gay." By that I mean it is not only post-Stonewall in sensibility but also post-AIDS in sentiment or, more specifically, the lack thereof. McCormack and Roscoe, together with Dennis Denisoff, Guy Babineau, R.M. Vaughan, André Martin, René-Daniel Dubois, Sky Gilbert, Brad Fraser, Lawrence Braithwaite, Billeh Nickerson, Daniel MacIvor, Bryden MacDonald, Clint Burnham, and Greg Kramer, among others, are writers who, for the most part, have never known sex without the association of death. This connection has, as I have argued elsewhere (see "Gay Literature 1" 450; and "Go-Go Dancing"), imbued much of their work with a decidedly apocalyptic tone, but it has also given rise to a new sense of fearlessness, of provocation, in terms of both content and form. "It is fearlessness that has positioned me before this computer," writes the nameless narrator of Denisoff's *Dog Years*. "We all know the power of fear, but I have switched sides" (7). As must the reader. What issues forth from these writers' computers can be disturbing; it can be dirty. One occasionally feels assaulted by the subject matter, by its narrative execution, or by both. But, whatever the posture of the individual text, its effect on the reader is rarely, if ever, one of indifference.

The work of these writers is also, typically, postnational in ideology, not only in terms of its artistic production outside the provincial vacuum of Canada's fractured identity politics, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of its critical reception as part of a literary-historical genealogy of international gay writing that far exceeds the rather delimited parameters of the canon of Canadian literature. For example, Roscoe's *The Lost Oasis*, set primarily in North Africa and involving an epic quest across the desert, has resonances with André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* and *Si le grain ne meurt* and especially with Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* (not to mention with Scott Symons's *Helmet of Flesh*, an intertext a bit closer to home). In Martin's *Darlinghurst Heroes*, to cite an example from this country's other solitude, a gay Québécois travels to Sydney,

Australia, to reconnect with K, a doctor and former lover discovering the limits of his healing powers amid an ever-widening AIDS pandemic, much like Bill in Hervé Guibert's *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. Not so coincidentally, both Martin and Guibert are accomplished photographers as well as writers.

McCormack, meanwhile, counts Gertrude Stein and William Burroughs among his literary influences, and his tendency to focus on alienated and disaffected teenagers, and the older men who frequently prey upon them, finds echoes not only in the new narrative stylings of American contemporaries such as Dennis Cooper (who blurbs *Dark Rides*), Matthew Stadler, and Kevin Killian but also in the antiromances of Kathy Acker (especially the "Rimbaud" sections of *In Memoriam to Identity*) and the earlier sexual anthropology of John Rechy's *City of Night*. Like Burroughs, Rechy, Acker, Cooper, Stadler, and Jean Genet before them (all published by Grove in the United States, a press that seems to me ideally suited to McCormack's anarchic and dissident narrative vision as well), McCormack dares to cast the homosexual male characters in his fiction as outlaws and antiheroes, at odds with society and positively flagellant toward their own bodies: *Dark Rides* opens with Derek rubbing sand onto his "pecker and belly and bum" (11) and proceeds to describe all manner of equally or more painful bodily torments, including the narrator's subsequent submission to electrotherapy in the aforementioned "Stargaze" chapter. In "The Freak," a story included in both *Wild Mouse* and *Wish Book*, the tubercular protagonist, who makes his living as the "Living X-Ray" at the local carnival, submits his ninety-pound frame to the heat and "liquefying" light of the "Spectro-Ray 2000" before dousing an overzealous fan's skin rash in vinegar (*Wish Book* 55–57).

There are, to be sure, portraits of male affection and friendship in McCormack's writing — in "Victor Mature," Hugh pulls Derek close, so that their eyelashes are touching, and intones "This is how much I care" (*Dark Rides* 41) — but these moments never add up to any "redemptive" or "idyllic" depictions of love. Instead, desire seems only to get spent in McCormack's fictional universe: in a story from *Wish Book*, the president of Turnbull's, the Peterborough department store that figures prominently in much of McCormack's fiction (a mock order form from the store appears at the end of *Wish Book*), spills "semen like egg white" at the back of the local confectioner's shop, then calmly writes a cheque for a cherry pound cake for his daughter's birthday (99). It's the details about the kind

of cake, as well as its decoration "with chains, scrolls, loops, garlands, piping, overpiping, diamond threading" and "daisies made with meringue," that make the image so thrillingly accurate (99). As in the work of Burroughs, ejaculate flows copiously in McCormack's fiction, and sex is mostly furtive, mechanical, violent.

Both *Dark Rides* and *Wish Book* are set in Peterborough, during the 1950s and the 1930s, respectively, and McCormack's spare, elliptical version of what Alice Munro felicitously dubbed "southern Ontario Gothic" (248)[2] seems to echo the earlier work of American writers such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor, especially in terms of how the Gothic in their fiction frequently overlaps with the grotesque. To this end, the Ted Pointer whose heavily veined member young Derek fellates in the hayloft in the opening story of *Dark Rides* is likely a direct allusion to the smooth-talking, Bible-selling Manley Pointer, who makes off with nihilist Hulga's artificial leg in O'Connor's "Good Country People." And the fictional Peterborough that McCormack elaborates in his books reads much like a northern version of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Like Timothy Findley's work, however, McCormack's Gothic-tinged writing seems to me to draw mostly on the example of Tennessee Williams. Yet, whereas Findley borrows mainly from Williams's drama in constructing the faded and unhinged matriarchal figures of Jessica Winslow and Mrs. Ross in *The Last of the Crazy People* and *The Wars*,[3] I would argue that McCormack's writing is more productively analysed within the context of Williams's short stories, especially in terms of the portraits of homosexual dissidence offered in classic texts such as "One Arm," "Desire and the Black Masseur," "Hard Candy," and "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio." The latter two stories, both set in the same movie theatre, and both focusing on the older men who haunt its balcony for anonymous sex with local hustlers, are notable for their conscious linking of homosexuality to what Robert K. Martin has called "a dysfunctioning within the body," particularly around the anus and the mouth (58). In "Hard Candy," for example, the unkempt and seedy protagonist, Krupper, suffers from intestinal pain and dies while choking on one of the candies from the title that serves as a substitute for the oral sexual gratification that he craves both to give and to receive.

The "deviant" bodies on display in McCormack's *Dark Rides* and *Wish Book* are likewise marked by physical ailments: pustulating sores, angry rashes, fleshy tumours. Life-threatening illnesses

such as lupus, tuberculosis, and scarlet fever also figure prominently in both books. And, as in Williams, the oral-anal equation, as well as its potential associations with "disease," are repeatedly foregrounded: at one point in the story cited above, the confectioner licks marzipan off President Turnbull's cock while fingering his own asshole — where he discovers a series of painful venereal warts (*Wish Book* 101–02). What is equally interesting in the case of McCormack is that images of illness, disease, and wasting are frequently coupled in his writing with both real and imagined displays of strength, virility, stamina, and stoical suffering through pain. In a story from *Wish Book*, for example, the narrator (once again Derek McCormack, his only appearance in this book), in the throes of scarlet fever, imagines himself to be a comic book superhero named "Scarlatina the Immortal":

> *Scarlet fever's wasting Derek McCormack's heart. The doctor hooks him to an electro-cardiograph.*
>
> *Hospital lights die, then surge back on. Ten thousand volts rip through Derek.*
>
> *He rises from the smoke. All muscle. A red S on his chest.* (46–47)

Similarly, in "Buoy," a story/chapter from *Dark Rides*, Derek, in remission from a recent flare-up of lupus, "hatch[es] a Charles Atlas regimen" of "sit-ups, push-ups, stretches" in order to impress the callous and aloof Bryan Benson (61). These acts of bodily self-torture, of almost wilful masochism, and the displaced pleasure that frequently results from them, recall Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur," in which Anthony Burns, who "from his very beginning . . . had betrayed an instinct for being included in things that swallowed him up" (205), submits to the sublime, slow burn of self-annihilation at the hands and mouth (literally) of a "black giant" (205).

Along the same lines, I would further argue that McCormack's recurrent motif of the midway, or exhibition grounds, functions in much the same way as Williams's movie theatre and massage parlour. That is, they are all sites of hyperaestheticized and hyperatrophied masculinity, where cowboys, superheroes, and strong men reign supreme over the weak, flabby, and freakish bodies that worship them. In addition, these spaces function as symbols of

popular, consumer culture whose economics of exchange ("You pays your money, you takes your chances," as the saying goes) are as much sexual as they are commercial.[4] "The midway's the hanky-pank," a wizened carnie tells a green stringer from the local paper early on in *Wish Book* (59), and, as if to prove that, the sculptor in charge of making the carnival's "flash," or give-away prizes, finds that when he surreptitiously starts casting his fellow employees' best assets in plaster he must eventually pay the piper, in this case "Stanley the Giant":

> . . . Stanley fell on top of me. Yanked down my pants. Plowed his dick in.
>
> After a while he grunted. Buckled up. "Biggest in the world," he said.
>
> I touched my hole. Spongy flesh stuck out. Semen like plaster running down my thigh. (69)

Movie theatre and midway also figure as spaces of unruly desire, fantasy, and wish fulfilment in a triptych of stories from *Dark Rides*. In "Victor Mature," Derek and Hugh share a tryst in the men's room while Derek's date, Lori, watches the matinee idol of the title perform heroics on screen. In "Stargaze," to which I will return shortly, the Peterborough Exhibition's makeshift "Science Fair and Planetarium" occasions a revelation about Derek's place in a reordered universe. And in "Ex," Derek recounts to an absent lover (Hugh perhaps) his summer job working at the fairgrounds, running rides whose names — the Zipper, the Jolly Caterpillar, the Salt-'n'-Pepper Shaker, the Heartbreak Express — are suggestive of both eros and loss.

That it is Derek McCormack who is both author and narrator/protagonist of these stories bears further analysis, especially in terms of the additional literary contexts signalled by the strategy. Of course, this overlapping of the fictive self and the authorial or autobiographical self is not new in literature. But the explicit foregrounding of this as an aesthetic device through the use of eponymous narrators does seem to me to correspond to an explicitly gay literary practice, from Proust's "Marcel" in *À la recherche du temps perdu* and the "Edmund" always hovering behind the "I" of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony* to the unmasking, late in each

novel, of "Dennis" and "Matthew" as the narrators' "real" names in Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* and Matthew Stadler's *Allan Stein*, respectively. Christopher Isherwood, however, is perhaps most closely associated with the use of what Lisa N. Schwerdt, in assessing his work, has called "namesake narrators." Starting with "William Bradshaw" (Isherwood's middle names) in *The Last of Mr. Norris* (1935), progressing to the "Herr Issyvoo" of *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), and culminating in the Chris/Christopher/Christoph of *Prater Violet* (1945), *Down There on a Visit* (1962), and the three volumes of autobiography that comprise *Lions and Shadows* (1938), *Kathleen and Frank* (1971), and *Christopher and His Kind: 1929–1939* (1976), Isherwood evolved a narrative persona that was at once alter ego and fictional character. Schwerdt notes that this movement coincided with Isherwood's growing acceptance of his sexual identity and with his desire to write about that identity as unambiguously as possible in his fiction. And, along these lines, we *can* read his post-1945 literary production as an extended exercise in self-outing, especially since later works such as *Down There on a Visit* and *Christopher and His Kind* revisit and revise the period of his life recounted most famously in his Berlin novels.

Yet, to the extent that we can apply the feminist and gay liberation mantra of the "personal as political" to Isherwood's narrative strategies in terms of his invitation to readers to identify his self, as author, with his narrator selves (and I think we can), both his novels that read like autobiographies and his autobiographies that read like novels simultaneously resist such easy equations. That is, Isherwood deliberately employs "fictive strategies that distance him from us and distance his multifaceted 'selves' from one another" (Kamel 163). The opening paragraphs of *Christopher and His Kind* are a case in point:

> There is a book called *Lions and Shadows*, published in 1938, which describes Christopher Isherwood's life between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four. It is not truly autobiographical, however. The author conceals important facts about himself. He overdramatizes many episodes and gives his characters fictitious names. In a foreword, he suggests that *Lions and Shadows* should be read as if it were a novel.
>
> The book I am now going to write will be as frank and factual as I can make it, especially as far as I myself am concerned. It will therefore be a different kind of book from

> *Lions and Shadows* and not, strictly speaking, a sequel to it. However, I shall begin at the point where the earlier book ends: twenty-four-year-old Christopher's departure from England on March 14, 1929, to visit Berlin for the first time in his life. (1)

We are confronted here not only with the distance afforded by the passage of time but also with the distancing or alienating effects of narrative space. We are instructed explicitly that the "Christopher Isherwood" of *Lions and Shadows* — a character in a book that we are told "should be read as a novel" — is not the same "Christopher Isherwood" about to be described in *Christopher and His Kind* — presumably a "truer" or at least "franker" representation of the autobiographical self. Nor should the authors of these respective texts — "he" versus "I" — be confused. As Rose Kamel puts it, such an opening prompts us to "read him [Isherwood] as a fictional character described by a somewhat unreliable narrator in turn created by an implied omniscient author who can erase and cancel out his narrator at will" (163).

Something equally complex is at work in McCormack's *Dark Rides*. Derek the author and Derek the narrator may share the same name, but the novel's period setting — the 1950s, before the author was born — precludes the reader from seamlessly synthesizing the two. Moreover, Derek the narrator seems to change character from story to story: from someone being acted upon sexually in "Backward" to doing the acting in "Treasure Trail" and "Love Lies Deep"; from someone apparently comfortable around dead people in "Dead Man's Curve" to someone suddenly uncomfortable in "Passing On"; from someone hearty and hale in "Hardwood" to someone weak and sickly in "Buoy"; from someone who seems to embrace his homosexual difference in "When in Rome" and "Stargaze" to someone who seems very much to be running from it in "Cattle Call" and "Men with Broken Hearts." The range of these portrayals, especially where issues of sexuality are concerned, indicates that the use of namesake narrators by McCormack (and by Isherwood before him) must not be read, in a reductive and vulgar Freudian manner, as a case of narcissistic and arrested ego identification, with the homosexual subject being unable to progress beyond a love of the same. Rather, the multifaceted deployment of similarly named but differently individuated "selves" in the writing of McCormack and Isherwood, the elaboration of the writing subject

as an artifact whose meanings (narrator, character, author) shift over time and space, points to the very constructedness of identity itself and sexual identity in particular. And that, for me, is the truly radical aspect of this "queer" aesthetic practice of narrative self-naming: how a discussion of "sameness" can lead to a fuller articulation of a theory of "difference."

Isherwood and McCormack can also be linked in terms of the immersion of their writing within visual culture. From the famous "I am a camera" credo at the beginning of *Goodbye to Berlin* (1) to the filmic vocabulary that began with *Prater Violet* to the description of the famous photo of Spender, Auden, and Isherwood on Reugen Island in *Christopher and His Kind* ("Christopher, compared with the others, is such a very little one that he looks as if he is standing in a hole" [82]), photographic and cinematic references abound in the oeuvre of Isherwood, furnishing him, in the process, with a convenient metaphor for his split narrative subject: observer/observed. McCormack compounds this split by including period photographs in *Dark Rides*, which, as I suggested above, locate the reader visually while dislocating him or her textually. In *Wish Book*, the accompanying drawings by Ian Phillips are equally complex and disorienting in effect. Each depicts an item or items referred to in one of the stories, but we as readers register less their practical applications (i.e., both their function within individual plots and their function as consumer products) than their status as ephemera, kitsch souvenirs (kewpie dolls, crepe paper masks, stuffed woodchucks) of our commodity culture that, in their proliferation, say as much about the (im)materiality of their status as objects as they do about the subjects who produce and consume them. At Turnbull's, in other words, customers and employees alike seem only as "real" as the products they buy and sell, a realness that, given the slightly garish and "surreal" quality of Phillips's drawings and the antinaturalism of McCormack's prose, suggests that our relationship with the world, our "being" in it, is best articulated through artifice and stylization.

Here, as well, McCormack shares affinities with other contemporary Canadian and international gay writers, including Roscoe, Martin, and Cooper. The work of these writers, to a greater or lesser degree, blurs the line between literary and visual production, exploiting metaphors of photography, cinema, and advertising in the representation of memory, desire, place, and identity (and the commodification of each), in the mixing of text and image and in

the snapshot and/or montagelike composition of their prose. It's useful to bring Stein back into the picture at this point, for it seems in part that McCormack is attempting, with his writing, prose portraiture of the sort pioneered by Stein (for her, the metaphor was painterly rather than photographic, although it's interesting to note that her two portraits of Matisse and Picasso first appeared in the magazine *Camera Work* in 1912). In the process, he introduces readers, in his short gay books, to a lapidary style that seems at once thoroughly modern and wonderfully anachronistic, employing as it does both familiar and historically precise words, concrete images, and compact, sharply focused declarative sentences that do not conform to the standard rules of grammar, syntax, and proper paragraphing. It's a way of focusing our attention, directing our gaze to what otherwise remains ephemeral, transient, evanescent — like desire itself.

The attention to period detail helps, in this regard, McCormack's fondness for descriptions of "Life Savers roll[s] garnished with a crepe-ruff bow tie" (*Dark Rides* 28), "white Stay-Press short-sleeved" shirts (88), candy mascots such as the sailor from the Crackerjack box and the "Wrigley Spearmint Spearmen" (*Wish Book* 138), "Rachel Red Lip Rouge by Blu-Bell" (169), and other products of mid-twentieth-century consumer culture, matching in authenticity what one would expect to be the perfect sepia tones of his accompanying images. The accumulation of such details is similar to time-lapse photography, in which layered images are imprinted successively and cumulatively upon the viewer's/reader's consciousness, lending palpable shapes to events yet blurring the lines between them at the same time. This technique is especially evident in "Backward," the opening story of *Dark Rides*, which, as its title suggests, unspools in reverse so that the reader is left at the end with a different view of what constitutes the physical conflagration at the heart of the story than he or she may have had at the beginning.

It's a narrative style whose obliquity is especially suited to the jump cuts and slow dissolves of film. This style, combined with the obvious symbiosis that exists between author and filmmaker, explains why "Stargaze" translated so well from page to screen. In the story, as in the film, eighteen-year-old Derek boards a Greyhound bus bound for Toronto to seek treatment for his "inversion." There an anti-Dionysian doctor by the name of Vine tapes electrodes to his body and zaps him with current while showing him pictures of

naked men. Derek, sucking grape Popsicles to soothe his swollen and lacerated tongue, returns home changed — but not as a result of Dr. Vine's aversion therapy. Rather, successive visits to Toronto's new McLaughlin Planetarium have shown Derek (literally) an alternative universe, one infinite in dimension, endless in possibility. And one that's apparently much more accommodating of his different angle of vision. Back in the narrow confines of Peterborough, with its mock planetarium in the form of a papier mâché sun and Styrofoam planets, Derek has only to tilt his head nightward to see "heavenly bodies whirring across the sky" (*Dark Rides* 47). In his fourteen-minute black-and-white film, McBride successfully conveys McCormack's minimalist prose style by forgoing extensive dialogue and resorting only sparingly to voice-over narration. Instead, he concentrates on visual details, the cut of Derek's suit, his Y-fronts, the beefcake pin-ups shown to him by Dr. Vine adding up to a portrait of 1950s masculine identity formation devastating in its anthropological accuracy.

In this regard, if the camera lens is one obvious optic through which to view McCormack's work, then another, perhaps less obviously, is the microscope, although one does make a crucial appearance in "Passing On," the final chapter of *Dark Rides*. Here, while attempting to come to terms with the conflicting emotions associated with the death of his grandfather and his affection for a classmate named Chris, young Derek is also instructed in the basics of atomic particles, their capacity to both attract and repel depending on the coincidence of positive or negative charges. Not surprisingly, the clinical narrative voice returns:

> Eons ago one microbe attacked another and engulfed it. Made the other one a part of itself. The result was a new microbe, stronger and with a longer life span. "This," said our teacher, "was the first example of sexual intercourse." Which sheds light on a lot of things. Pneumonia. Gangrene. Atrophy. Putrefy. Corrupt. Different names for the same thing. (98)

This commingling of the sexual, the scientific, and the scopic is heightened in *Wish Book* through the presence of fluoroscopes, X-rays, Spectro-Rays, and all manner of other arcane electromagnetic devices designed not just to see but also to see *through* bodies. Together with his penchant for cataloguing (ailments, behaviours,

goods, practices, types), woven into the very narrative fabric of *Wish Book*, the presence of these mechanisms for reading the "diseased" body — and, by extension, one's impure thoughts — suggests an almost Kinseyesque quality to much of McCormack's writing. And it is with a brief discussion of what one might call the "Kinsey context" of McCormack's work that I would like to conclude this paper.

Alfred Kinsey, in his own quiet way a pre-Stonewall gay pioneer, began his professional career as an expert on the gall wasp and thereafter applied the same rigorous training in biological classification and taxonomy to documenting the "sexual behaviour" of North American men and women in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. And the more bizarre the behaviour the better. Indeed, Kinsey would have been right at home amid the carnival sideshow atmosphere of McCormack's catalogue of sexual and anatomical "freaks." Under the imprimatur of scientific objectivity, and with the help of a large and coordinated research team working out of the institute that now bears his name at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, Kinsey was able to build a massive archive of interview transcripts, photographs, films, props, and related paraphernalia, all documenting what he called the continuum of human sexuality and human sexual behaviour. The most famous published representation of this continuum, and what would arouse the greatest controversy when *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* was published in 1948 (see Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin), was what came to be known as the "Kinsey scale," which ranked male sexual-object choice on a six-point grid from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual and which, when applied to Kinsey's massive sample of interview subjects, determined that "37 percent of all red-blooded white American adult males were having some homosexual experience to the point of orgasm" (Waugh 390).

Of course, as postmodern critiques of empiricism and positivist science have demonstrated, there is often a noticeable gap in knowledge between the collection of quantifiable data and the qualitative assessment of that data. In the case of Kinsey, this gap again points, in fundamental ways, to the constructedness of sexuality itself. As recent studies of his life and work have shown, his repeated claims to objectivity often overlapped with a very subjective eroticism practised in the name or, less charitably, under the guise of "science."[5] As a result, it was often difficult to separate the observational from the voyeuristic, the pedagogical from the

prurient, in Kinsey's research methodology. As Thomas Waugh puts it in his pioneering study, *Hard to Imagine*, with Kinsey (as with his sexological predecessor, Magnus Hirschfeld), "the microscope is also a peepshow" (367).

This link between sex and surveillance, between the observational and the occupational (all the stories in *Wish Book* take as their titles what it seems appropriate to call *job titles*), is also highlighted in McCormack's writing. Indeed, the reader soon discovers that Turnbull's department store, where most of the stories in *Wish Book* are set, is equipped with a series of two-way mirrors. In "The Ghost," an employee uses them to spy on Bing Crosby "in his skivvies" in one of the menswear change rooms, unaware that when Bing emerges fully dressed to the glare of waiting flashbulbs the employee himself will be caught on film: a store detective "pulled out a photo. Bing grinning. A ghost floating behind. Me. My dick in my hand" (91). The mirrors figure explicitly as mechanisms of control and entrapment in "The Elf." Here a new employee recruited to answer Christmas wish lists from children reports to his manager on what he sees as a different kind of recruitment being practised by fellow employee Blake. While a confused Blake is forced to tell a psychiatrist what he sees in a series of Rorschach ink blots, "behind the two-way" the manager asks the whistle-blowing employee how he "knew": "I shrugged. 'He tried to make me go fairy, too'" (110).

Yet where there is power, as Foucault famously instructed us in *The History of Sexuality*, there is also resistance. Thus, while many of the stories in *Dark Rides* and *Wish Book* focus on the monitoring, control, and regulation of nonnormative sexual practices and identities, many more focus on what escapes detection, including that which, as yet, can only be imagined. Here, too, we find a crucial link to Kinsey. As Waugh notes,

> what was inscribed and what is legible in the Kinsey project . . . is not only the scientific knowing, codification, controlling, and repression of the homosexual body and its desires; there is also its preservation, its affirmation, its enactment, and even its celebration — in short, its resistance to power. The contradictions and tensions within Kinsey's practice and vision provided a structure and language of emancipation, and acted as the catalyst, arbiter, and executor of the homoerotic imaginary in the postwar, pre-Stonewall era. (401)

This is the era that McCormack has largely chosen to focus on in his fictional ethnographies of perverted Peterborough, and it has required him to become, in Kinseyesque fashion, an archivist of the invisible, a collector and classifier of the hidden and taboo. In so doing, he shows us that the dividing line between the licit and the illicit is not always so easily demarcated (as was the case in Kinsey's own life). McCormack, like Kinsey before him, reveals what goes on behind the ordered storefronts, fairgrounds, lilac hedges, and cornfields of small-town life: in haylofts, department store change rooms, parking lots, and washrooms, he shows us instead desire's inherent disorder.

NOTES

[1] The magazine, which has a penchant for adorning its covers with period photos akin to those that McCormack includes in his texts, and which likes to identify contributors by the intersections or landmarks nearest their homes (e.g., Sussex and Ulster or Seaton Village), has so far featured two stories by McCormack: "Wish Window," in issue 1.1 (1997), and "The Author," in issue 2.1 (1998). The former, retitled "The Salesclerk," eventually found its way, in somewhat different form, into *Wish Book*, while the latter reads in part like a metafictive account of the collaboration between McCormack and illustrator Ian Phillips on *Wish Book*.

[2] See Munro's interview with Graeme Gibson in *Eleven Canadian Novelists* for her elucidation of this Canadian subgenre.

[3] For a fuller discussion of Findley's debt to Williams, and to McCullers, see Gabriel.

[4] Williams's stories also highlight issues of power as they specifically relate to differences in race and class.

[5] See, for example, the recent biographies by James H. Jones and Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy as well as Thomas Waugh's *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from the Beginnings to Stonewall.*

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