CRAIG STEWART WALKER'S

The Buried Astrolabe: Canadian Dramatic Imagination and Western Tradition.

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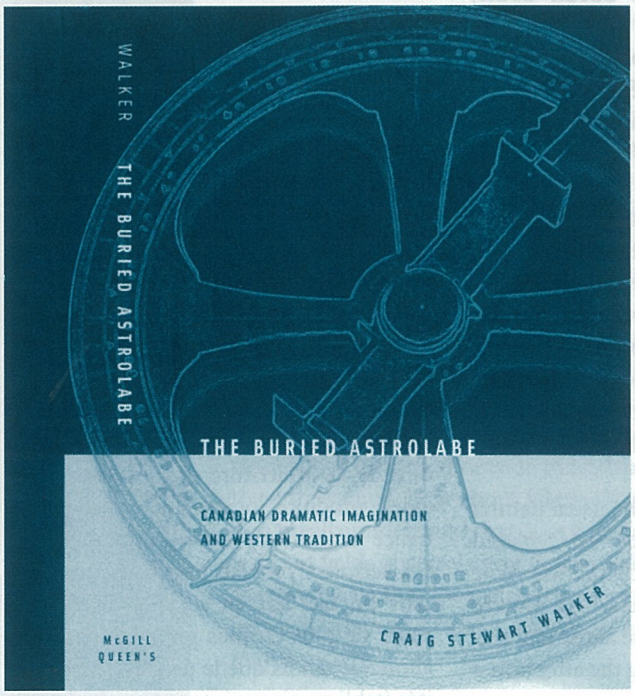

THE TITLE OF CRAIG WALKER'S EXTRAORDINARY EXAMINATION OF CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN DRAMA IS AN APT INDICATOR OF ITS IMAGINATIVE RANGE: IT GUIDES HIS JOURNEY OF EXPLORATION OF THE WORK OF SIX DRAMATISTS, AND FUNCTIONS AS A TROPE FOR THE WAYS IN WHICH TRADITION INFORMS THEIR MYTHOPOEIA. THE PROLOGUE TO THE BURIED ASTROLABE BEGINS WITH AN ANECDOTE ABOUT THE DISCOVERY OF CHAMPLAIN'S ASTROLABE ONE MONTH AFTER CONFEDERATION IN A FARMER'S FIELD IN THE OTTAWA RIVER VALLEY, ESTABLISHING THE TANGENTIAL APPROACH THAT CHARACTERIZES THE STUDY AS A WHOLE: APPROACHING THE CENTRAL ISSUES FROM UNUSUAL AND ENGAGING POINTS OF VIEW THAT DRAW THE READER INTO THE MORE EXACTING ANALYSES TO FOLLOW. THE IMAGE OF THIS ASTROLABE APPEARS ON THE STRIKING DUST JACKET OF THE TEXT, AND INTRIGUINGLY IS ALSO THE PROMINENT IMAGE ON THE COVER OF THE JOURNAL OF CANADIAN STUDIES 34.4 – PERHAPS AN INDICATOR OF ITS RESONANCE AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL. WALKER SIMILARLY STRUCTURES EACH OF THE SIX CHAPTERS AROUND A COMPELLING TROPE THAT PROMPTS A CLEAR VIEW OF THE SEMINAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH PLAYWRIGHT, WITHOUT PRECLUDING AN INVESTIGATION OF THEIR AMBIGUITIES AND COMPLEXITIES.

In the preface, Walker clearly establishes his main objective, which is to explore the nature of the mythopoeic context "within which a dramatic imagination could reconfigure Canadian experience in its own image, rather than a conspicuously borrowed disguise" (vii). He provides a rationale for the chronological ordering of the playwrights, and he also posits the criteria for his choice, those whom he regards as Canada's "most important" – James Reaney, Michael Cook, Sharon Pollock, Michel Tremblay, George F. Walker, and Judith Thompson: they have a substantive body of "excellent" work; and he has something to say about them. That his choice reifies a (critically challenged) canon established in anthologies of Canadian plays, is not an issue, nor does he attempt to cover regions, genders, languages. As is characteristic of the text as a whole, Walker makes his case confidently and convincingly. The Buried Astrolabe is not, however, an "introductory" study, as he claims: it provides an exhaustive analysis of the six playwrights in terms of a Western tradition that includes forays into the philosophies of Plato, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Sartre, Foucauld, the plays and poetry of Yeats, Synge, Eliot, Jacobean City Comedy and Greek tragedy, providing for readers who may be initially not much inclined towards Canadian drama a

rich experience of Western culture within which to locate their own. Walker is an unabashed proselytizer.

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Like his mentor, Northrop Frye, he constructs an "anatomy of criticism" on the foundations of the Bible and William Blake. In identifying the "isotopies" in Canadian drama, he identifies his own as "a conceptual place in which self-reflexiveness may be resolved into a coherent vision."

Walker begins each chapter with an epilogue – eclectic quotes from Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Joni Mitchell, D. H. Lawrence that underscore the motifs he identifies in the plays under analysis. Perhaps the least fortuitous choice is that of Douglas LePan's poetry for the preface, which now appears dated in its images of a "desperate wilderness," and which, despite Walker's contentions, does not really function as a pervasive organizing principle for his text, although LePan's poem entitled "Astrolabe" does provide another dimension for the unifying trope – that the past predicates present and future courses for a nation's culture. It is not lost on Walker, however, that the astrolabe was also the colonizer's instrument of mapping, in order to structure and control a land already occupied by others.

Walker does not shy away from large statements, which he launches with conviction and underscores with evidence; e.g., "Hence, the most auspicious eras for theatre have been those in which history and location have yielded a strong and relatively unified sense of self-consciousness and, accordingly, a widely recognized lexicon of dramatic conventions." He recuperates unabashedly the terminology of romanticism and spirituality in order to locate the sublime in the Canadian experience, and casts a skeptical eye on more fashionable postmodern precepts, particularly the recent attempt to deconstruct Canadian "nationalism" as socio-political regions of race, ethnicity, and gender: "Personally, I can't see how that solution is a whit more promising than the discredited monolithic construction of national identity. To identify oneself electively in terms of such materialistic categories is one thing: but to universally ascribe identity to others wholly in terms of 'standpoint politics' is not only illiberal and dehumanizing by also demonstrably inaccurate."

Similarly, Walker identifies the mythopoeic characteristics of each playwright's work, his generalizations supported by a rigorous analysis of structure and style, and candidly "riding on the coattails" of those critics whose analyses "cannot be surpassed." Reaney's central myth is founded in Yeats's "ceremony of innocence," and in the vision that "a properly trained talent for metaphoric thought is a sort of alchemy through which the dress of the material, quotidian world is transformed into the precious spiritual element necessary to our redemption." Walker's summaries of Reaney's "major characteristics" are succinct and compelling, and his judgments unequivocal: The Donnelly Trilogy, "which undoubtedly stands as one of the greatest accomplishments in Canadian drama" is "a mythically resonant, socially defining, major historical epic." Michael Cook's Newfoundland, like Synge's Aran Islands, "exists in a state of poetic tension: a 'fallen' world haunted by its noble promise; a harsh and often brutal place that, not withstanding, still bears traces of an alternative, idealized cosmos against which the deficiencies of ordinary experience may be measured." In Sharon Pollock's plays, Walker locates the concern with "the difficulty of establishing truth, and hence an integrated self, in circumstances where personal agency is badly corrupted by the insidious and ubiquitous systems of social power and by self-serving distortions of reality." He interprets her plays in terms of "elegiac romance" in which "the narrator is involved in an act of self-recovery that is accomplished by telling the tale of his erstwhile hero" – a process of "careful, conscious, voluntary disillusionment." Walker identifies Michel Tremblay's "existential mythopoeia" in his construction of an "anti-mythology" as a means of overcoming "a sense of alienation and to create a healthy, whole self-image." He draws on Sartre's explication of Genet to illuminate Tremblay's gay texts. George Walker's "Postmodern City Comedy" he sees as fundamental articulations of contemporary conundrums: "what should or should not be destroyed in the name of creative progress; the difficulty of reconciling our distrust of exploitative social institutions and authorities with our need for civic order; the prospects of forging an ethical society in a world seemingly governed by moral relativism; the tension between specific human affection and abstract social idealism." He sees in Judith Thompson's plays a chthonian impulse – an exploration of psychic warfare, and "subliminal connections among the desires and taboos of the unconscious." He concludes his analysis with a humanist exhortation – one that underlies the exegesis of The Buried Astrolabe as a whole: "to transcend the barriers between our conscious selves and these four last things [death, judgment, heaven and hell] hidden deep within marks the first step towards transcending the barriers between us and our fellow human beings." The critic too has his mythopoeic vision.

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