1972

The theme of the artist in the novels of Ernest Buckler.

William Ronald. Walker

University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/4315

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.
THE AUTHOR REQUESTS ALL THOSE WHO USE THIS THESIS TO SIGN BELOW.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE THEME OF THE ARTIST
IN THE NOVELS OF
ERNEST BUCKLER

by
William Ronald Walker

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario
1972
Approved:

Homer Plante
(Chairman)

John Ditsky

Vito Signore
ABSTRACT

Ernest Buckler is best known for his important first novel, The Mountain and the Valley, and, as it provides a strong base for the study of the theme of the artist in his works, I will devote much time to it, and to its central character, David Canaan.

In Buckler's novels, two concepts dominate. There is the theme of the artist and his work, and the theme of man's ability to delude himself. Both ideas are present in all of Buckler's work, the former most strongly in The Mountain and the Valley, and the latter in The Cruelest Month. His third book, Ox Bells and Fireflies, however, links the two preceding works together by its emphasis on the theme of the artist, and, more specifically, on the working out of Buckler's concepts of the art of the writer, forming a continuity and unity which cannot be matched by the theme of self-delusion. For this reason, although not neglecting the second theme, I have chosen what I feel most strongly permeates the entirety of the Buckler canon. In this respect, whenever I discuss the theme of the artist, it should be understood that Buckler deals specifically with the problems of his own art—writing—and therefore the terms artist and writer become interchangeable.

My major argument, in brief, runs as follows. In his first book, Buckler deals with the character of the artist. By concentrating his attention on a potential writer, David Canaan, who ultimately fails his promise, he provides an ironic contrast with the qualities that will succeed. At the same time, he also provides a second contrast,
between the primitive artist of the country, and the civilized
medium of language, through which he must express himself.

In his second book, *The Cruelest Month*, Buckler concentrates on
the art of the writer. Through Morse Halliday's expression of the
frustration of the writer who has lost the ability to create, he deli-
neates the qualities of writing which will produce a successful work
of art.

Finally, in *Ox Bells and Fireflies*, Buckler, using a narrator who
combines in himself the primitiveness of the country, mastery of lan-
guage, and mastery of form, produced his most perfect work. *Ox Bells
and Fireflies* unites the concerns of previous two novels, the writer
and his art, through the use of Mark. He is the writer David Canaan
couldn't be, because he is, like Ellen, both a part of his environment
yet separate from it, and he is able to write as Morse Halliday
couldn't, because he follows the guidelines Buckler perceives as the
basis of artistic work.

In this way, the three novels are integral; and taken together,
they present a comprehensive vision of the theme of the artist.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I</td>
<td>- Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II</td>
<td>- The Mountain and the Valley, Part I</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III</td>
<td>- The Mountain and the Valley, Part II</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV</td>
<td>- The Cruelest Month</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter V</td>
<td>- Ox Bells and Fireflies</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter VI</td>
<td>- Conclusion</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Auctoris</td>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ernest Buckler needs no introduction to anyone who is at all familiar with Canadian Literature. His first novel, *The Mountain and the Valley*, is taught in most courses on the subject in Canadian universities, and his work has been widely anthologized. Yet he remains on the periphery of modern Canadian literary criticism, possibly because he writes of a rural environment in a world caught up with urban affairs, but more probably because his works have never been properly linked together. His second book, *The Cruelest Month*, is often seen as an unmitigated failure, and his third novel, *Ox Bells and Fireflies*, as nothing more than a rural idyll. This thesis will attempt to show that the three novels are indeed connected, and, taken together, provide a comprehensive discussion of the theme of the artist, and, more specifically Buckler's concern, the theme of the writer.

*The Mountain and the Valley* will be discussed first. I hope to show, by an extremely close examination of its action, Buckler's concern with the artist in society. To do so I shall naturally concentrate on the main character, David Canaan, but I shall also consider the figure of Ellen, David's grandmother, as indicative of Buckler's concern with the artistic urge as expressed in non-verbal forms. Ellen is a pure country artist, unfamiliar with and unmindful of the artistry of words, an artistry which has more in common with the city than the country. I will show that David is a prisoner of both: in love with both the silence of the country and the wordiness of the city, his
creative urge is destroyed by this dichotomy of inside and outside; he withdraws too much into solitude to ever be able to express his creativity in writing, or any other form in which it can be communicated to others.

The theme of The Cruelest Month will be seen as the continuation of the minor theme expressed in the first novel, that of self-delusion. I will attempt to show that, far from being a failure, Buckler's second book is successful to the extent that it contains one major theme, to which all of the secondary themes are related. I will also attempt to show that some of the criticisms levelled against the novel are unjust, because they unfortunately miss the point Buckler is attempting to make, along with the subtlety with which he makes it. I will also show that Buckler has continued the theme of the artist in The Cruelest Month, where, through the persona of Morse Halliday, he treats the problem of the waning of the creative urge brought about by the frustration of knowing that one cannot capture everything perfectly, faced by the practising writer.

Ox Bells and Fireflies, the third novel, is Buckler's most perfect. In The Mountain and the Valley, he dealt in great detail with the figure of the artist; in The Cruelest Month, he dealt with the work of the artist - the writer's craft; in Ox Bells and Fireflies, I will show, Buckler has combined the two, and produced a book consistent with the best principles of both. In this novel, Ernest Buckler has united the artist with his theory. Ox Bells and Fireflies is the crowning achievement of the career of a major Canadian novelist.
I feel that I must here at least attempt to make a case for the apparent short-shrift which I have given the last two novels.

First, I should mention that both of the previous two theses written on Buckler gave the same approximate weight to these novels as I have given. I realize that precedent of this sort (since it is so scanty) has no real bearing on my thesis, but I feel it should at least be taken into consideration.

Second, and most important, I feel the theme of the artist warrants such treatment. Only this theme can unite the three novels—self-delusion is important, but has no strong bearing on _Ox Bells and Fireflies_. This last novel can, however, be strongly linked with the theme of the artist, as it embodies the working-out of Buckler's theories of art which are developed in the two previous works. The artist must be an integral part of his society, yet somewhat different, apart. He must isolate himself, but not to the extent David does. Buckler's personal problem is that of city vs. the country—David embodies this problem as well, and is unable to satisfy it—from his error, Buckler proceeds. Mark is both completely of the country of which he writes, and at the same time apart—the novel also illustrates one way (The _Cruelest Month_ does so also) in which the gap between writing (civilized) and storytelling of the type practised in pre-literate society can be bridged—by using the outward form of the myth.

The _Cruelest Month_ is only concerned with the artist in terms of Morse. Therefore only the passages in which he, as a surrogate for Buckler, is speaking about his art are truly applicable to the thesis. It seems to me that self-delusion, to Buckler, is a human failing, not
an artistic one. Morse is capable of being a successful writer despite his delusion—indeed, there are hints that such a delusion is necessary, that without it he lapses into a state in which he cannot write. David's delusion, that he can always change himself, is, likewise, a human failing—it in no way affects his art, except perhaps to the extent that he would have to change in order to become a writer.

I hope that this explanation is acceptable. I would have liked to have drawn the two later novels more strongly into the thesis, but there just wasn't enough there as concerns my topic. On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any other area of concern which would adequately explore the three novels as a continuum.
CHAPTER TWO: THE MOUNTAIN AND THE VALLEY, PART I

In The Mountain and the Valley, Ernest Buckler expounds one of the oldest of human concerns - the alienation or isolation of the individual in society and its effect on the character of a developing artist. He traces this theme by a close examination of the protagonist, David Canaan, as he experiences the development in himself of a creative, or artistic urge. "Here, then," writes Claude Bissell, "is the familiar conflict we find in a score of novels about the spiritual growth of sensitive young men." 1

To examine this theme the best method is probably the one used by Buckler himself: a close study of the novel in a regular, chronological order. Buckler is a relatively traditional writer. He employs a methodical pattern focusing on small, to some perhaps unimportant, happenings in life. As Claude Bissell has observed:

Thus, The Mountain and the Valley is divided into what he would call a series of illuminations, each dependent on a single event - a drowning, an incident in a school play, a visit to the family cemetery, a letter from a stranger, the dislodging of a large rock in the field, an accident in the barn, a farewell to a friend. 2

At all times Buckler strives for clarity in his presentation of David's character, but a clarity modified by insight. Thus, although the first image Buckler presents of David is strong, simple and direct, the depth of his isolation is conveyed. He is pictured as a man who

2. Ibid., p. x.
had never left home, a simple man who had suffered a cut that had left
a painful scar, watching children at play, isolated from the world and
its problems. However, David is more than merely a quiet country man-
his character has far more depth, and Buckler hints at this in his
description of his face.

At first glance his face looked young....At a second
glance his face seemed old....The longer you looked, the
less you could be sure whether the face was young or old.1

An entire novel is needed to reach any sort of understanding of
David, for he is like the rug constantly being woven by Ellen, with much
of others in him, yet ultimately his own person. In the prologue
Buckler reveals all of the pieces which make up David. In the novel, he
shows what the pieces mean.

As a child, David is not alone; he is secure in his place in his
family. In fact, his individuality is based upon this feeling of
security, and dependent upon it. "Yet, somehow, having his father and
Chris with him would make him more securely alone with his mind's
shining population than ever." (The Mountain and the Valley, p.20)

He is a boy full of excitement at the prospect of the fishing trip that
day, a trip that will bind him closer to his father and brother. Yet
Buckler strongly emphasises and foreshadows, the alienation and sorrow to
come:

"I dreamed," David said, "you and Dad and me was on the
log road, only it was funny" - he laughed - "all the trees
was trimmed up like Christmas trees. And then it was like
there was two of me. I was walkin' by myself on this other

1. Ernest Buckler, The Mountain and the Valley, Toronto: McClelland
further references will appear in the body of the thesis as MV.
road that didn't have any trees on it." (MV, p.21)

This foreshadowing is important, for the sorrow brought about by David's isolation forms a large part of the flaw in his character which prevents his potential as a writer from ever reaching fruition.

However, the dominant impression of David now remains that of an excited boy, and here Buckler's great talent for exact imagery is displayed. In the same way that David is explained through a series of small, explicit incidences, so too his excitement is conveyed through precise thoughts and feelings:

"Aw, Mother, I won't be hungry!" Always that: Would you be hungry, or tired, or warm enough? If he could only make them see how meaningless the possibility of being hungry later on was. (MV, p.24)

On the fishing trip they are told of the simultaneous deaths of Spurge Gorman and Pete Delahunt. This news destroys the day for David; but indicates how important death is to the community in which he lives. For death fuses the people together for a time in honest grief, and in fear at the fragility of life, before the rituals of forgetting begin, rituals that place death in the past and life in the present again, rituals that make ordinary life appear meaningful once more.

Then when all the first shock had settled and the thing was at last really believed, the village seemed to fuse. Women found in other women, just to see them coming up the path to talk over this terrible thing, a glow as of reconciliation. Men who had been bad friends for years sidled next each other in the groups and took up each other's remarks, warming at the sound of their own voices.....

.....Then it all became ritual. (MV, p.42)

To David, the funeral is a time when he and Effie Delahunt grow closer together, his first contact outside his own family. Buckler uses a concept of the world divided into an outside and an inside to
indicate sharing or synthesis, and isolation or separation. "The breeze of sadness blew outward now, not inward." (MV, p.46) Both Effie and David relinquish a part of their dependence on their families to share in a new relationship, the future growth of which is emphasized by David's offer of marriage.

A second indication of David's increasing love of separation is his speech in the school play. He keeps the speech a secret from everyone else, thus placing them outside of himself, unable to share in the world which the words create:

The words were something no one else had. For that reason, everyone who was there when the thought of them came seemed revealedly wonderful, and somehow more fiercely loved, for being so pitifully, humdrumly, outside it. (MV, pp. 55-56)

His feeling toward others when he thinks of the words is basically one of pity, pity that they cannot share his secret with him. This feeling, however, does not extend to his sister, Anna. Anna, to David, is special, for he does not feel isolated from her in the same way he feels isolated from the others. He loves his father, but cannot talk to him; with Chris, his brother, it is the same. He feels close to his mother and grandmother, but is not one with them. Anna, however, is so close to him that he does not have to share the words with her:

And to think of them, with Anna, was best of all. For Anna was like a second safety: a place he would still have - to go to, if his secret thoughts ever failed. (MV, p.56)

Yet, despite the closeness of his relationship with Anna, he still does not share the words with her. This is significant because it reinforces the image of David which Buckler wishes to present. Even at such an early age, and in such a secure environment as his own family,
David's individuality asserts itself, leading him away from others. His isolation is a part of himself, not something superimposed from without, and as such is a part of the artist's necessary psychological makeup. Buckler here is saying that artists are born, not made. What they are able to make of their gift plays a large part in their eventual success.

The speech, however, is not to be delivered for some time. In between comes Christmas, and on describing this occasion Buckler shows how well he understands the feelings of a child on Christmas Eve. He describes David's emotions as the family trims the tree:

Someone would say, "Pass the scissors?" and David would say, "Sure," beating with gladness to do them any small favours. Martha would stand back and say, "A little lower on that side," and they'd say, "Like that? Like that? More still?" all full of that wonderful patience to make it perfect. Everyone would laugh when someone slipped off a chair. His father would say, "Why wouldn't some red berries look good in there?" and to hear his father say a thing like that filled the room with something really splendid. Sometimes he'd step on Anna's toe as they busied back and forth. He'd say, "Oh, Anna, did that hurt?" and she'd laugh and say, "No, it didn't hurt." He'd say, "Are you sure?" and just that would be wonderful. (MV, p.64)

However, in the midst of David's joy at Christmas, a figure comes to him in a dream, the figure of the man who will become closer to him than any other in the closeness of two solitudes. David and Herb Hennessey are alter egos in the sense that Herb already is what David will become, a solitary figure known to everyone, yet known by none. His first appearance, in the prologue, sets him apart.

Herb Hennessey was coming up the road, but he wouldn't be coming here. He'd never gone into another house, as far back as when David was a child. (MV, p.16)

His second appearance is in the dream, where he foreshadows David's
loss of contact with the security his family represents. In effect, he becomes David in the dream, cutting down the Christmas tree of youth. A further change in David's life is also seen in the dream, for the presents under the tree belong either to himself or to Anna, symbolizing their closeness, while the sound of the falling tree becomes blended with the sound of a train whistle, which will become intimately connected with the person who severs David and Anna's closeness, her husband, Toby.

Christmas is symbolic of family ties and security, the ties that David will lose - and that Herb Hennessey has already lost, for Christmas to him is like any other night.

To David, the next day of note after Christmas is the day of the play, the day when he will get to speak the words he had kept secret for so long. His stage fright isolates him from everyone else:

There was no comfort in anyone near. It was worse than being sick. Then the other faces were outside your pain, but when they smiled at you the pain softened. Now he was absolutely alone. (MV, p.77)

Even the people who have come to see the play - his parents, the parents of his friends, Herb Hennessey - are strangely different, isolated, "outside the curtain." (MV, p.77) And those in the play, in saying their pieces, are isolated from each other, because they do not speak to each other, but only recite the lines they have memorized. David's part is different, for he seems to command the lines, to become his character rather than just to play him. Buckler's concern with the exactness of imagery is mirrored in David's triumph in the play. "He was creating exactly the person the words in the play were meant for."

(MV, p.80) For a time David feels a closeness with everyone in the
audience, and exults in the pleasure of the successful actor. "This was better than the cosiness of doing anything alone. He'd never do anything alone again." (MV, pp. 80-81) The last scene, however, destroys this closeness, when his improvised kiss and the resultant laughter on the part of a young man in the audience causes him to run:

Shame struck first; then anger. His breath trembled. His lips puckered over his teeth. The anger gave him a rough physical shove. He threw his cape on the floor, as one smashes a mirror that reminds of some hateful scar. Tripping over it, he stumbled from the stage. (MV, p. 82)

In his anger, no one can get close to him, for David reacts by building a wall around himself, by withdrawing into the safest place he can find. Martha tries to reach him with words and fails. Joseph knows there is nothing he can say, for "Even when David was willing to talk he couldn't seem to find any words that fitted what he meant to say back." (MV, p.85) Chris tries to make some sort of contact in the only way he knows, by touch, but is rejected by David. Only Anna does not try, for only Anna can truly understand David's pain. Then David begins to lose his anger, and regret takes over; he begins to re-enter the world that he shares with others. Here a major characteristic of David's, and one that strongly affects his relations with others, is shown for the first time. In his regret, David wishes to relive and change the past. He wishes to make amends for the hurt which he has caused those who love him, but is unable to find a way to do so that he can accept:

He wished the door could blow open, but it wouldn't. He wished he could make out he wanted a drink and go downstairs and leave the door open when he came up again, but he couldn't. He wished he could put Chris's arm back over his shoulder, but he couldn't. He wished he could open the door and go in and say something to Anna - not about this, just anything - but he couldn't. (MV, p.86)
Each time something happens which takes David away from his family, the break is irreversible. Chris invites Charlotte Gorman to join them on the day they visit the family graves, a day which, to David, ".....was one of the days when the family was indivisible." (MV, p.87) On this day Chris has his first sexual encounter, and Charlotte and he are forever bound together, a part of the family, yet subtly apart from them.

There was no constraint between any two of them, to make a fifth presence. The group was fluid. And yet it was as if, if the day were suddenly split by an instant of hydrolysis, David and Anna would be at one pole and (though there was hardly ever any direct communication between them) Chris and Charlotte at the other. (MV p.93)

Chris' experience causes an argument between himself and David later that night. David notices that his brother's fly is buttoned up crooked, and he chides him about it. Chris reacts quickly and harshly.

"Don't you tell anyone!" Chris said.

It was like a slap.

David felt small and strange.....He felt betrayed. He felt almost a sudden hatred of Chris. (MV p.100)

David's first similar experience comes soon after, and the effect is much the same. He is further isolated from those closest to him, especially Anna:

It was the first time that David, looking up and seeing Anna come toward him, had seen her as a stranger. The olderness of the thing that he and Effie had done left her behind. (MV, p.114)

Effie has now taken Ann's place as the one always to return to, but she cannot fill the position adequately, for David cannot ever feel for her as he once felt for Anna. The security is there, but it is a different kind of security, one that can never be as complete, nor as satisfying.
This is mirrored in Buckler’s art—David is never as completely at home with those characters and environments that he has not known all his life, as he is with those he has; they are familiar, but are not as closely understood. As soon as David receives a letter, Effie is forgotten.

The day that David receives his first correspondence from Toby Richmond is a day which is important as a turning-point in David’s family. Anna and Toby will meet and marry because of it; Chris, for the first time, separates the sexual act from Charlotte, and his dissatisfaction with her is first revealed; Martha’s jealousy of Joseph, the sickness without foundation that will haunt her for the rest of her life, begins; and Ellen, David’s grandmother, for the first time loses control of her mind. (MV, pp. 116–117) The letter is not, of course, the cause of these events; but that it is placed in conjunction with so many incidents of great importance heightens the significance of the occurrence. All of these events are seemingly unimportant, yet they set the tone for much of the rest of the novel; for all are indicative of the coming dissolution of the Canaan family. Even the weather participates in the significance of the reception of the letter: "That was the summer that had almost every day like August. That was the night the weather broke." (MV, p.117)

However, the events which will separate the family are still in the future, unseen and unguessed at by any of them. The unity of the family still exists and is re-emphasized by Buckler with the building of the new house, the largest in the village. An undertaking of this sort is of prime importance to everyone, yet to a rural family it takes on aspects which are lost to anyone dwelling in a city. The fact that
the house is both planned and built by the farmer, and is usually meant to last for more than a lifetime, being handed down from generation to generation; makes its construction a part of the person and a source of community pride. This pride, in Joseph's case, is linked with humility, the humility of the strong man whose gentleness will not allow him to use his strength against anyone weaker. Martha's pride is in the excellence of her husband's work:

The other women would....say, "My old house looks so shabby when I go back home." Then Martha would feel a glow: not of pride, but of feeling that if it were of pride they wouldn't be saying those things. (MV, p.120)

Joseph, when complimented on the size of his house, ".....would feel a curious humbleness for having the largest house in the village; one he wouldn't have felt at all if his house had been the smallest." (MV, p.120)

Both react to the praise tendered them with this similar sort of humility which comes with the knowledge that what one has accomplished is beyond the capability of any of his peers.

To David, the new house becomes almost an extension of himself, in that it fulfills both his inside and outside needs. He chooses as his room the attic, the top of the house, from which he can look out in all directions and see everything as far as the horizon. Yet all he needs to do is close the door, and he is separated from that outside:

When he closed the door behind him, there was the exciting feeling of being unreachably alone. It wasn't the isolation of real severance (that was intolerable) but a cosy isolation of his own making. The sounds that came up to him were blurred beyond insistence by the height. They were just loud enough to remind him that company was to be had whenever he chose it. (MV, p.121)

David is still in control of his isolation. He can still end it at
any time, for he still has the security of his family on which to rely. Yet his solitude is growing, along with the different, somewhat heightened perception symbolized by the view from the attic. His ties with Chris are breaking, for they no longer share a room. And his increasing introversion, his increasing need for separation, is evident in his choice of room.

David is slowly maturing as an artist. He is increasingly moving out on his own, relying on his own resources and desiring new perspectives. An artist, Buckler is saying, cannot be content with the perception of others. He must be an individual first, and, through introspection, achieve a clarity of vision which will allow him to see what others cannot see, and relate that vision to others. However, while David is discovering this new world, he is losing his ability to relate to the old.

His grandmother, Ellen, notices David's increasing isolation. She can see, in each person's face, the face of others close to him. "It was queer, she thought, how each of them carried hidden in his face the look of all the others." (MV, p.122) David's face shows this most often, yet, ".....most assaultedingly of all, David seemed to have no face of his own." (MV, p.123) David is certainly a part of his family, yet he remains strangely outside it. All the others have identifiable faces, but David keeps his hidden. It is hidden so well that even his grandmother is unable to pierce the mask. His character is similar to the rug she is weaving in the sense that all of the characteristics of the others are being combined, yet the final product remains unknowable. David, in the end, will be completely unlike any of those whose faces are reflected in his. Yet his face will never surface. Rather it will always remain as
a mirror of others, since to see a person clearly one must know him well, and no one will ever know David well. It is questionable, in fact, whether David ever truly knows himself well. He is caught up in forces which are to a great extent, beyond him. His tradition is the country, yet he is continually drawn away from this toward the city. He can never truly be at home in either environment, and in desperation he withdraws into himself. Increasing urbanity plays a large part in his failure as a writer, removing him from a heritage which he might have explored, and plunging him into a tradition which is not his own, to which he is not exposed until late in his life.

Joseph and Martha are much different. Their closeness need not be verbalized. Bissell states,

Joseph, the father, is a man of simple integrity and kindness. Between him and his wife, Martha, there is an understanding no less strong for being unexpressed. With them, "speech broke rather than forged the quiet contact." 1

Yet even for these two there are hidden levels of isolation. Martha's jealousy of Joseph is a barrier between them, erupting occasionally, as when he bought Bess Delahunt's pie at the social. So, too, is her feeling that Joseph is often inconsiderate of her:

Sometimes it would take no more than that: the sight of Joseph completely taken up in conversation with another man; forgetting that she was waiting or, remembering, making no account of it. (MV, pp. 127-128)

At such times Martha is completely isolated from her husband and, more importantly, is completely unable to re-establish contact. Joseph, at these times, is bewildered, for he cannot reach inside to her any more than she can move outside to him. A barrier is created, and the silence between them assumes a far more ominous note:

1. Bissell, pp. xi-xii.
Wait.....wait.....wait.....With their silence chaining them together, but as if, if their bodies touched they would make a sudden nightmare sound. (MV, p. 129)

Like his mother's David's isolation is not always self-imposed, but is often brought about by circumstances beyond his control. He is closest to his sister Anna, but Anna is sent away to school, and the physical break causes an emotional break as well. "That evening Anna was amongst them more tenderly than ever before, but more separately." (MV, p. 132) When she returns to the farm, she is no longer alone, for she meets Toby Richmond at the train and they come home together.

The meeting of Toby, Anna, and David at the gate, with David's friend, Steve, looking on, shows how sensitive David is to the impression he creates on others. With the added presence of Steve and Toby, the greeting between David and Anna is strained, indicating the depth of the split between the two. David is more concerned with the effect of the greeting on the two onlookers than on his sister. He also betrays the embarrassment he feels about his rural background in his first words with Toby. "'Ain't it hot!' David said. He couldn't bring out 'isn't,' with Steve standing there." (MV, p. 133)

A major part of Buckler's treatment of David's alienation is this sense of inferiority that is brought on by Toby's presence. Toby is David's alter ego, the part of him that would renounce his background. As such, he represents the city to David, who can never rid himself of the feeling that somehow the city is better, more sophisticated, educated, and refined, than the country. Although he is from the country, he can never consider it more than second best. The other boys cover this feeling by laughing at Toby's city ways, but David never can. He wishes
he could be like his new friend, and continually attempts to impress him. Toby is also David's replacement in Anna's life, for he loses Anna to the city he can never reach. Their closeness is shattered by the addition of a third party who shares Anna's confidences:

David stiffened. He had the sense of the one who is never there, who is told only. He felt the inhibition you feel when someone whose laughter has always been conspira-
tional with you alone, tells you of laughing with another. (MV, p. 135)

David's family's treatment of Toby underscores this feeling of inferiority, for they, too, feel clumsy in his presence. However, they are able to continue their normal business; for, unlike David, they are not ashamed of their country ways, but have only the normal reserve associated with meeting a stranger, who, because he comes from a different environment, does not have a common ground from which to begin a relation-
ship. Toby is merely alien to them, not superior, and they would never understand David's feelings of shame. David, however, feels painfully sensitive about his family's rusticity, and attempts to act as a buffer, as one who combines attributes of both the city and the country and can appreciate both. As a result, he is isolated from both. He feels defen-
sive about Chris's smirk, but cannot feel truly comfortable alone with Toby. This dichotomy in David causes him a great deal of guilt:

David lay awake, thinking: I have a friend. What he's been missing all his life had been a reflection of himself anywhere. Now he had discovered it at last.

But why, when the house was quiet with the sound the silence makes to the only one awake, why did he think of the others - his mother and father and Chris? He pictured their faces. Defenseless in sleep, somehow they bore marks on them (which only he could see) of the way he'd felt toward them throughout the afternoon and evening. Why did he feel that he couldn't wait till morning to talk to them, in front of Toby, about something Toby couldn't share? Why did he want to creep
downstairs and awaken them, pretending he's heard someone call, making them assure him over and over, until they began to laugh about it, that they were all right? (MV, pp. 142-143)

The visit also separates David from the other boys of the village, for Toby gives him an alternative life-style, one which he can admire and desire to emulate. He could not wish to be like his friends, but he can wish to be like Toby, and he therefore defends him against all others, as he had done with Chris earlier.

During Toby's visit, David also realizes that he can use his isolation as a weapon, for as he is inward-looking, Toby is the opposite, and cannot stand to be alone:

He couldn't stand isolation. They had that exquisite power which only the lonely have (because they can bear their part of the isolation, from habit), of inflicting it on him. (MV, p.145)

However, although David can at times hurt Toby, Toby is always in the position of hurting David, simply by being everything David wishes to be, an idol to be emulated. David must constantly attempt to impress his friend to no avail, and at times with disastrous results. Earlier in his youth David had been moving outward, and had established a relationship with Effie, even to the extent of having his first sexual experience with her, at a very early age. This experience became meaningless to him upon reception of Toby's letter. David further reduces the possibility of establishing any kind of lasting relationship with her by using her sexually and embarrassing her in front of Toby.

There was no pleasure in it, in the field. The spasm was as flat as the whirring of a clock just before it strikes the hour. He hated himself, thinking of the ruining look on Effie's face: the look of trying to accept, without knowing what it was, his reason for shaming her. (MV, p.146)
Effie's death, three days later, drives David, in his grief, to a sexual encounter with her mother. He had been unable to find real fulfillment with Effie, and he merely transfers to Bess the physical need which her daughter had alleviated. David will never be able to have a meaningful, total relationship with a woman. He will use Bess as she is used by most of the men in the town - as a sexual outlet, and nothing else. The barrenness of his sexual life mirrors the barrenness of his isolation. The abnormality of his affair with Bess, an older woman and the mother of the only other lover he had taken, mirrors the strangeness of his life cut off from normal human contact. The guilt he feels at being the cause of Effie's death immures and solidifies him in his solitude, even after it fades.

The guilt soon passed from voice to echo. But it was the first thing that he could tell no one. It taught him that secrecy about anything (even a hateful thing like this) made it a possession of curious inviolability, and tempted him to collect more. (MV, p. 152)

This is undoubtedly the climax of the novel in terms of the theme of the isolation of the artist, as it refers to the break in David's life between the time he was able to reach out, however hesitantly and awkwardly, to others, and the time when this is no longer possible. The novel is about the growth of a potential artist. To this point David has shown nothing in terms of writing, but he is developing the consciousness necessary to be a successful writer—the isolation necessary to perceive what we can all perceive, if we are all artists, or if an artist has pointed it out to us. David has also shown creativity (in the school play) and an enthusiastic curiosity for things around him, a curiosity lacking (at least outwardly) in others around him. He
has not yet been exposed to writing, because it is not a part of his
tradition, and as a result his artistic expression has been stunted.
From this point - the centre of the novel both structurally and thema-
tically - David's story will be that of a man drawing ever more heavily
on his inner resources, until they run dry.
CHAPTER THREE: THE MOUNTAIN AND THE VALLEY, PART II

Although he has not yet shown any development as a writer, David is slowly evidencing the qualities necessary to an artist. His major problem does not seem to be his potential, but his inability to control and channel his impulses. When his creativity has found outward expression, as in the school play, it has been denigrated by those around him, and as a result his explorations outside of himself, in his environment, have been curtailed. This has caused him to withdraw into himself, and in Chapter Two, we saw that David would increasingly be drawing on his inner resources. One of these is his belief that he can always leave the farm and the valley. At many times in his past he had dreamed of being the best in the world at whatever profession struck his fancy from time to time, and that profession has always been away from the strength of his roots and the tradition of farming. This belief is destroyed for him when he is unable to rebel against his father.

The tension between the two men is centred around the removal of a rock which has been in the field for generations. This work brings strongly to rest in David the conviction that he will never be able to leave the farm, and the strength of this chafes him. "He would grow old here, he thought, like his father. That's what it would be like: the pace of an ox." (MV, p.158) Both the physical tension and exhaustion and this mental pain build up and combine to cause an explosion; David's harsh words, his father's anger, the blow across the face, and the furious dash away. David attempts to leave, but is unable to. In the
car he realizes that the people from the city are not like him, and that he could never live with them.

He could see her glancing at his father in the doorway as she passed, commenting casually to the man beside her and then selecting, as if the landscape were on a tray, something else to look at. He saw the fraying of his father's sweater at the cuffs. (MV, p. 168)

During the ride he sees the countryside as never before and realizes how much it means to him.

He had never seen so clearly how the field sloped up behind the barn.....He had never felt so plainly the arching of his bare toes on the hay stubble.....or heard so sharply his father's voice that night they were all lost.....(MV, p. 168)

David here finally knows that he can never leave. That myth had been as solid as the rock in the field before, but now it is forever banished. The strangers in the car make his leaving easy for him. The offer him a ride directly to Halifax, are willing to wait for him while he picks up what he told them he forgot, even go so far as to give him the hope of employment. Yet he cannot go, and he is unable to abide staying. He is isolated from the very environment, ripped out of his roots as the rock will be. "He felt as if he were in a no man's land....."; (MV, p. 170) then "He began to sob. He sobbed because he could neither leave nor stay. He sobbed because he was neither one thing nor the other." (MV, p. 171)

That night, after the rock has been removed, Ellen gives David a locket with the picture of her sailor in it, for she once felt as he feels, and she senses the artist in him. She, too, had wanted to leave, to run away with the man she had sheltered, a man who himself was running, but she had stayed, tied to the land and to a husband she could
never love, only respect.

David, however, does not realize that the locket is Ellen's recognition of his creative potential, and he treats it with almost supreme indifference.

When the family goes to cut the keel, they accede to Toby's insistence on taking his car, even though they are sure it can never reach the mountain's top. Her Toby indicates in his character a willingness to venture out, where the others in the family never would.

David felt a shift to Toby's side. The others had the rights of it; but why did they always have to come out with so many sensible, indisputable reasons against anything a little foolhardy? Toby would think he had the same pinching caution as they had. (MV, p. 176)

In fact, David does, and this conservatism has kept him on the farm. He can only admire Toby for attempting what can not be done. He cannot make the attempt himself.

This outing also enables him to see the abrrier which has grown up between himself and Anna. Her life in the city has dulled her appreciation of the simple things of the farm, which once would have meant a great deal to her, such as the removal of the rock. This detachment, which causes her to be distracted from David's story by a run in her stocking, makes the telling of his attempt to leave home impossible for him:

He couldn't go on. For a minute it seemed suddenly darker under the trees. He knew that time and separation had sealed them off from each other a little. Nothing like it did with others, but even with them, a little. (MV, p. 180)

For the first time he is unable to tell Anna something important about himself. Anna, too, feels the gulf. He gives her the locket, but
she can not tell him whose picture is inside. "She didn't sense that steady listening which had always been between them." (MW, p. 180) They never will retrieve that feeling, and they will always be apart far more than physically. The picture that David thought resembled him, looks like Toby to Anna. They are both right, for in a very real sense David and Toby, although opposite, are connected. Toby is everything David is not, for they are two sides of one personality. The sailor is like them both, for David wanted to leave an undesirable situation, but lacked Toby's willingness to try.

David lacks this willingness because he has learned not to trust it. Every time he has attempted to go outside of his conservative instincts he has failed, as was graphically illustrated by his improvised kiss in the play and his unplanned run from the farm. He tries again to set himself apart by doing something foolhardy when they are killing the pig. By climbing the beam even when he knows that heights affect him, David is attempting to prove to the others, and especially to Joseph and Chris, his masculinity. He strongly resents the fact that they consider him a dreamer, somehow strangely apart from themselves, yet he appreciates the special freedom his separation from the others allows him.

Joseph never counted him, as he did Chris, when he figured the number required for a job like this. It always annoyed David. Yet, in a way, he was glad of it. The spectator sense had a special freedom when no specific niche in the job was assigned to you alone. (MW, p. 183)

Despite this, David still retains his need to affect others, and this results in some awkward situations, especially when he is in the company of people he wishes to impress in ways contradictory to one another. This is reflected in his embarrassment in talking of sex with
his father and Chris. He can joke with the other men, but when he and Chris or he and his father are alone, they are constrained, \(MV, p.187\) because he wishes to impress them in a different way from the others. He will say anything in a group, not to brag about his masculinity, but to make them laugh. "Suddenly he despised Ben's sly smut. But he couldn't help saying what he did - not if it made them laugh." \(MV, p. 187\) With Joseph and Chris things are different. He resents Chris's genuine concern, about the effect on David of his words, but he also resents the lack of concern on the part of Ben and Steve about his wound. And he also resents Chris's perceptiveness in not reminding him of the fact that he gets dizzy when he climbs.

The scar David receives from his fall becomes the outward manifestation of this resentment, of his rejection of Chris. Chris attempts to apologize later that night. David refuses him:

At last he said, "Was it what I said, Dave? I didn't mean...." He wanted to answer, "What.....? Oh that....." and smile, But he couldn't.

He remembered the awful feeling when Chris turned and left the room. A feeling that the chance was gone to fix this thing up between them. \(MV, p. 194\)

David will never again be able to relate to Chris, and this fact is made concrete by Chris's coming marriage. The physical separation of the family and Chris mirrors David's isolation of himself from his brother's concern; and as time goes on, Chris is increasingly left out of David's life, until his move to the West is seen in no different light than a stranger's would. "Chris was gone. They would still see him every day, but he had gone." \(MV, p. 199\)

The scar also represents David's growing isolation, since he is now physically disfigured and unattractive. The occasion of the scar is also
associated with the part of life which he despised - killing, and his forced association with the mediocre mentality and inarticulateness of the people of his community. David becomes set apart from his environment.

The split between David and Chris, and the acquisition of the scar, directly precede David's discovery of writing. During his period of recovery from the wound, David reads a book given to him by Dr. Engles and has "......the flooding shock of hearing things stated exactly for the first time." (MV, p. 195) David begins to write, using writing therapeutically, to free himself of the pain of having something inside of him which cannot be articulated. He writes to capture thoughts and feelings, to isolate them from himself, to remove them from the inside and box them outside. David has found the means by which he can express himself and relate to others, but he does not know how to use it. Writing could be the way out of his extreme isolation, as well as a means of real self-discovery, but like every other aspect of his life it ultimately fails him, because he does not properly employ it. He hides his efforts, and is constantly embarrassed by them. They are not an attempt to communicate with others, but to come to grips with his loneliness without approaching others. Buckler, like David, believes in recording exactly the feeling or image he experiences. Claude Bissell says:

This is a novel which is written with intensity and with painstaking care. Like his hero, Buckler has tried to say things exactly. He is striving to avoid the generalized phrase, the easy cliche, the long and sonorous sentence, and to make each word a servant of his vision.....It is a measure of Buckler's strength that he cannot easily be fitted into any of the usual critical categories. 1

Buckler writes to gain insight, and to communicate that insight to the reader: it is to this end that he wishes perfection in his images. He does not wish to capture or conquer, but to illuminate.

Thus, although their methods are the same, that is, the attempt to record exactly the writer's perception, their motives differ. David's motive for writing--to free himself of his own personal pain without recourse to others--ultimately fails him, for art which is never communicated is never released. Buckler here is giving a graphic example of the waste of a writer's talent when there is no involvement with an audience. A work which is never seen by any but the artist is only a part of the creative process. It is like a tree falling in the middle of an impenetrable forest, producing only sound waves, not sound itself. Since David's art is never received, it can never truly leave him, and its pain returns again.

He took the scribbler from under the pillow and re-read the lines he'd written. They had the same stupid fixity as the lines of cracked plaster in the ceiling. There was nothing in them, to come alive as often as they were seen. They were as empty as his name and address scribbled across the white spaces of the catalogue cover in a moment of boredom.

He took his pencil and blacked them out completely, obliterating even the loops of the letters.

And then, like the gradual stealth of a train's rumble in the distance so that you can't tell exactly which moment you heard it first, he felt the pain returning. (MV, p. 199)

David is slowly losing the only people who have had any close relationship with him. Chris is married to Charlotte, and Anna will marry Toby. Anna's dissociation from the family is shown in the image of the package of tenderloin sent to her, cut from the pig they had slaughtered when David received his scar. Even though she realizes the time and
trouble that had been taken in preparing the package, and even though she knows what the pig meant to the family as a symbol of their unity, a major event in their lives in which they all participate, she is still afraid to show it to Toby for fear he would laugh. She can never again feel at home anywhere but with Toby and in the city.

Joseph, too, is lost to David, and the manner of that loss hastens Martha's death. The isolation she feels at times and the frustration which it imparts to Joseph cause him to leave in anger and go up the mountain to cut the keel. He never returns, and Martha finds him later that afternoon:

And then, with Joseph lying there as if all the deafness in the world were smiling out at her from him, the quick-flaking silence began to close in on her, and the forsakenness. She put her apron over her face. She whispered, "Joseph, you forsook me....you forsook me...." (MV, p. 222)

There is no one left for David but Ellen and Toby. Ellen is fast retreating into the private world of senility, outside of the boundaries of time, where she will remain until the end of the novel. She has been seen as a link between the characters of the novel, Buckler's symbol of the perfect non-verbal artist, the artist of the country who is truly a part of the quiet, silent world of understanding in which both Joseph and Martha participated. It is a world and an art that David cannot appreciate or enter, trapped as he is in civilization's net of words.

Ellen's art is, in fact, completely non-literate. In terms of the chronology of artistic forms, writing is a late-comer. Both forms of art utilized by Ellen--weaving and story-telling--are precursors to the art of literature, and as such are completely at home in the country environment of which she is so much a part. David's art, on the other
hand, more properly belongs to a more civilized world, which had developed
the technology necessary to transmit its culture on a more permanent
basis. Certainly Ellen was aware of writing as an art, and lived in a
culture more than advanced enough to encompass that art, but her use
of earlier forms of the creative urge strongly underlines Buckler's image
of David as a man caught between two cultures, neither of which he can
truly enter. He cannot leave the country, but he forsakes its art for
the art of the city. To further emphasize David's inability to develop
his creative instinct to fruition, Buckler makes clear the fact that
Ellen's stories are transmitted, and the rug which she is weaving is com-
pleted.

Toby's departure is recounted in the last section of the book. He
is represented by the symbol of the train, an essentially alien part of
the landscape, only passing through the countryside, never settling down,
a basically mysterious force which is only part of David's life as a
lonely whistle heard in a dream. As a train picks up a passenger and
then travels on, Toby has taken Anna from David and will leave for the
war.

David has become increasingly isolated from his environment, to the
extent that, like Herb Hennessey, he is never bothered by the children at
Hallowe'en. Five years have passed since the scar, and his voluntary
exile from the world is almost complete. Although he still appreciates
the company of Toby and Anna, David has withdrawn from everyone else.
That this isolation is self-imposed is seen in the fact that he recog-
nizes its existence in his life as long as he can remember, that it has
always constituted a part of his character, and also in the fact that in
every case where he has been physically isolated from a member of his family, an emotional break has preceded it:

His loneliness was absolute, but it wasn't intolerable for being something foreign. The seed of it had always been there, even when he was at the hub of fellowship with others. (There was never one of them he could really talk to, though they never doubted that they were talking to him.) He withdrew in bitterness because he was no longer whole. It was self-willed. (MV, p. 228)

In his loneliness David can exist as he never could if he were in contact with the rest of the world. But for this he sacrifices the ability to create, because he is cut off too completely — he has lost his essential humanity.

There is no literary principle which says that an artist must stay within some sort of arbitrary bounds in order to be able to create. In fact, boundaries are constantly being tested by succeeding generations of writers. However, one of Buckler's points about David is that he does in fact remove himself too far from the bounds of his own human understanding, and that he cannot properly create because he does not truly know what he is talking about. An artist must be grounded in some sort of culture—he must have an essential humanity to communicate—and David has lost that, or perhaps has never gained it. Buckler would be the last to say that isolation or introspection is always harmful to a writer—but he would say that that introspection and isolation must contribute to an understanding of humanity, the human condition. David's isolation does not lead him to that sort of illumination. In solitude he does not need to reflect the patterns of a changing world, and thus he can relate to others even though they cannot relate to him. They think they are speaking to him, but they are not:
Part of his loneliness had always been that he could tell the coin from the replica. Just as part of it now was that even in his isolation he was not islanded from the true spirit of the changing times. It was as if a kind of extra sense kept him parallel with it, without dependence upon participation. He had been born with a condition for universality within him. In whatever place or at whatever time or with whatever person he found himself, his first response was not adaptation but recognition. He could be old with the old, or young with the young.

That was the part which most made his loneliness absolute. There was no single place he fitted in. (MV, p. 229)

This lack of definition of himself in terms of others has caused David to lose his ability for true communication. His timelessness is sterile, because he does not relate to change, he merely recognizes it, and mirrors it. David takes nothing from either his environment or others—he is never a part of the world in which he exists. Therefore, although he can recognize the people with which he comes in contact, he is unable to define himself in their terms. Thus his own special insight cannot be communicated in any meaningful human terms. The greatest artists have been men who were so much a part of the essential humanity of their era that they could transcend the confines of time. They have been isolated from others in their ability to see universal foolishness and truth through the events of the present, but they have never been isolated from Man. Their isolation gave them sight; David's gives him blindness. For this reason his writing never satisfies him—it never truly lives. For this reason, too, he misses the most important event in his generation's life, the war. "The war had gone around David. It was like all the rest of the things that happened to the others." (MV, p. 246) Only occasionally does he realize how far he has removed himself from others:
Suddenly he had a picture of Old Herb Hennessey. He heard himself, as a child, saying, "Aw, let's not bother Old herb....he's no fun." They'd always called him Old Herb. Not because he was really old, but because he lived to himself. (MV, p. 233)

He reassures himself, however, with the thought that ".....time can always be made to begin at the beginning again." (MV, p. 233)

Unlike David, Toby has not remained static; although he lacks David's introspection and thus can only participate in events without ever understanding them fully. Like David, he is not ".....one of the sure ones", (MV, p. 248) and attempts to make up for this by an excess of enthusiasm.

David and Toby are used by Buckler to emphasize his belief that an artist must have both an introspective ability through which he can translate in artistic terms his creative viewpoint, and a solidly developed tradition, of which he is an integral part, and in which he can participate fully. David has the former, but lacks the latter. For Toby the roles are reversed—he does not long for a different tradition, as David does, but he lacks the introspective vision necessary for the artist to truly see life. Buckler further emphasizes this by bringing David and Toby closely together. During the final visit of Toby and Anna, these two men who embody such strongly opposite reactions to their own inadequacies come to a type of synthesis. David, for the first time in his life, experiences something approaching real companionship and real communication. That night he writes about a boy who, although he was sick and missed the war, could understand what those who had had actual experience in war understood. His story, significantly, concerns the death of a young soldier named Tony (Toby), and thus serves both to indicate David's newly acquired feeling of friendship, and also to foreshadow
Toby's death. However, the greatest significance is that David here is writing from his experience - the experience of having missed life, yet being able to mimic the actions of those who have not.

Once again, however, his old reticence wins out over the new enthusiasm. When Anna and Toby discover him writing, and Toby even reads the first few lines of the story, David grabs the sheet back violently and destroys it in the fire:

If Toby read what he'd written, he thought he'd die. The whole thing seemed unutterably shameful. How could he have put down anything so damned sickly and foolish? War was about as much like that as.....(MV, pp. 263-264)

Throughout the novel David's advances towards communication have been thwarted, either by the unknowing or unfeeling reactions of others, or by his own sensitivity. In one of the most powerful sections of the entire novel, Buckler details the effect on David of Toby's departure on the train without looking behind, and David finally realizes that his last chance has been irretrievably lost:

This was the toppling moment of clarity which comes once to everyone, when he sees the face of his whole life in every detail. He saw then that the unquestioned premise all his calculations had been built on was false. He realized for the first time that his feet must go on in their present path, because all the crossroad junctions had been left irretrievably far behind.....You could build a wall about yourself, for safety's sake, but whenever you chose you could level it. That wasn't true, he saw now. (MV, pp. 274-75)

David realizes finally that his life will continue to pass by with no effect on others, as it has for so many years:

There had been a war, but he hadn't been in it. There had been these things while he was alive and young, but they'd all been for other men. The trains had all gone by. (MV, p. 276)

Yet, in spite of this realization, David attempts once again to
blind himself to believe the time has not passed when the wall can no longer be levelled:

When Toby comes back, he thought, I'll do something to put him outside, something he'll be jealous of....But then he knew that nothing he could ever do would put Toby outside as he was outside this. (MV, p. 277)

Throughout this section the contrapuntal images of inside and outside are repeated, as David realizes how far outside of life he has come, and how great is his desire to be once more inside. He realizes, too, that "Now, even with Anna....even with Anna now....he was outside." (MV, p. 279) Then, finally, the old pattern renews itself, as the pain caused by the sudden trauma of self-awareness is stitched over. That pain had caused him, in a rage, to destroy the parsnips on which he had been working. Now, he returns to them:

He was on his knees, patting the torn flesh of the parsnips back into shape as best he could. Maybe if he put sods around them in the cellar, they wouldn't spoil. There was no trace of thinking on his face now. Nothing but the crusted smudge of a tear track he had wiped at with his dusty hand. (MV, p. 278)

David has become an automaton. Like his father, he will remain at a task far beyond his physical capacity, but without his father's reasons. Joseph would continue because the job had to be finished and because he gained great joy and satisfaction from work which others found distasteful. David's stubbornness is the same as his isolation, born not of love but of hate. "Something unplastic, unbent, unshuffling in him, still drove straight ahead." (MV, p. 279) In this state of automatic movement, David is able to synthesize the inside and outside, yet remain aloof from the environment. In effect, he looks at the inside and outside of his own solitude:
The inside was nothing but one great white naked eye of self-consciousness, with only its own looking to look at. The frozen landscape made no echo inside him. There was no tendril of interaction. (MV, p. 281)

David's isolation has taken him to a level at which he becomes completely involuted. He now walks as a stranger in an alien environment.

In this new level of awareness, David sets out for the mountain, the mountain which looms heavily over the entire novel, and is never far from David's thoughts. The mountain is not a geographical barrier, for it is less than a mile high. Rather, for David, it represents the emotional or mental barrier which he cannot surmount, the wall separating him from others.

Meeting Steve, he assumes the pose of friendliness he has learned to adopt. "David's mind deliberately suspended its own nature. It assumed the cast of Steve's. He could synchronize his behaviour with any of theirs now." (MV, p. 283) David is the painful combination of rural and urban life. He is the one who should have left the farm for the wider vista's offered by the city. He is as different from those around him as the city is from the country, derived from them but not part of them, and thus able to mimic them perfectly. Yet he is forced, both by circumstances and by his own unwillingness to venture outside, to remain. He is a stranger in his own home whose inward view, as seen in his final climb, is the death of his creative urge.

David is now only interested in the inside and outside of his own mind, and thus heads for the most solitary place he knows - the top of the mountain - a place where even the physical presence of the outside world will have no effect on him - where he can achieve what he truly
wants - a view of life, a perspective, which requires no participation.

The sight of the houses and the bare fields (stripping as the first cast of dawn that sentences the wakeful's last hope of sleep) could not reach him at all. He was alone. Now he was absolutely alone.

He said, "It's perfect here." Involuntarily. Aloud. (MV, p. 286)

Here even the spruces act to protect him from that world, forming an insulating shield around him. Here, even time has no real meaning, and David's thoughts, all of his thoughts from childhood on, begin to gather about him, slowly at first, then more quickly and insistently as they pressure him to assimilate them all at once. The attempt to do just this almost drives him insane:

He screamed, "Stop, stop...."
Then he thought: Myself screaming "Stop." Then he thought: Myself thinking of myself screaming "Stop," thinking of myself thinking of myself thinking of ....
And then he put his arms about the great pine and thrust his forehead against its hard body. He screamed, "Stop.....Stop.....Stop.....STOP....." (MV, p. 297)

And at the very top of the mountain, David turns inward once again, and looks, not out at the world he has never seen, but into the valley he has known all his life.

The epilogue is David's supreme fantasy. All his life he has dreamed of being the best at whatever he was to do, be it skating, medicine or writing. On the mountain these thoughts return to him. He believes he can begin again. This hope, after he had realized that all hope is gone, sustains him to the very end. "He fought back with desperate, foolish plans." (MV, p. 277) This has been David's tragedy - the belief that he could, at any time he wished, erase the mistakes of his past and start anew. He never can, but he never truly resigns himself to this fact.
Buckler himself says, in a letter to Dudley H. Cloud:

As for the idea that David's death was an arbitrary device to end the story, it actually happens to be the very first thing I wrote; the foundation of the whole thesis.... that he should finally exhaust himself climbing the mountain; and, beset by the ultimate clamour of impressions created by his physical condition and his whole history of divided sensibilities, come, at the moment of his death (to) achieve one final transport of self-deception; that he would be the greatest writer in the whole world.¹

And on David's creative potential, Buckler, in the same letter, comments:

She (Miss Beck) complains that there's no explanation why he (David) doesn't become a writer. Well, for one thing, only one in a million, however potentially talented, in actual life ever does. And it was the crucial irony of the whole set-up that the writing business was just another instance of his fatal self-deluding blinding by transports of enthusiasm (as illustrated also in the "best fiddler" business, the best soldier, the man who had gone everywhere and done everything....)².

David's tragedy is therefore that of a man falling ever more greatly into the error of depending on his inner resources until they can no longer sustain him, and ".....the appealing mystery of his loneliness becomes the oppressive ordeal of his unbreakable solitude."³

The novel is a supreme examination of the effect of a self-imposed isolation on the individual, an extreme isolation which cripples his creative instincts and prevents him from bringing them to fruition.

David's failure is that of the potential artist who isolates himself from

2. Ibid.
a life that he cannot stand, changing introspection, which can be a creative force, into one that is demeaning and destructive.

Buckler obviously does not believe that isolation is, at its core, malefic, for if he did Toby, who is completely a part of his environment, would be an artist. He is not because he cannot objectify that environment - to do this some inner abstraction is necessary. However, Buckler does believe that isolation can be taken to an extreme, to the extent where the artist is so alienated from others that he can no longer speak for or to them. This is David's tragedy; he can never know his fellow men well enough to communicate to them, because he is caught between two traditions and is unable to be a part of either of them. He cannot, as an artist must, both feel and participate in life.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE CRUELEST MONTH

In The Mountain and the Valley can be found the theme of the artist in society; but a strong secondary theme was that of self-delusion - the endless capability people have to ignore the basic facts of their existence, and to believe that, at some time in the future, they will be capable of breaking out of their self-imposed cells to become new, better people. This secondary theme assumes dominance in Buckler's second novel, The Cruelest Month.

This is a strange book, and it has elicited a strange response from various critics. About the best any of them could say was that it would bear a second reading. This is true. On subsequent perusals many of the difficult problems which affect an understanding of the book disappear, or become resolved.

The Cruelest Month is a far different novel from The Mountain and the Valley, but it is not inferior for being different. The problem Buckler was dealing with in the earlier book rarely, if ever, surfaces - Morse Halliday, the artist-figure, is not a failure, as David Canaan was. He is a successful writer who has temporarily lost his creative ability, and who desires a retreat in which to get it back. In fact, Morse Halliday is almost the opposite of David Canaan. Where David was too insular, too isolated, Morse is almost too great a participant in life, to the extent that he does not have any opportunity to relax and translate his experience into art. His retreat to Paul's place affords him that opportunity, and also affords Buckler the opportunity to set down, through
Morse, the principles and the frustrations of his art.

The problems which one encounters on reading this novel are twofold. First, Buckler is writing about people from the city, an environment he knows about, but about which he does not have that intimate awareness he has of country life and country people. As a result, his portraits, at first, are somewhat stiff, almost superficial, for he is not as much at ease with these people as he is with the people of The Mountain and the Valley. He knows them, but they are not kin, and as a result he seems to exhibit some of the reticence of the Canaan family when they first met Toby. By the end of the novel and on re-reading, this superficiality has disappeared however, except for some of the dialogue, which jars by its lack of believability - for example, when Sheila says to Rex:

"Of course I loved you the first time I saw you,".... "Haven't you ever read any fairy tales? It doesn't take the little old princess two seconds to know it's the little old prince....If you'd been the little old frog that day, I'd have known you were the prince."1

The second criticism that can be made of The Cruelest Month is that, as a novel, it lacks coherence and continuity. This point is admirably developed in John C. Orange's thesis on Ernest Buckler.2 He notes that the book is a hodge-podge of themes, running off in all directions, with none of them truly relating to each other, as if Buckler had tried to cram all of his ideas into one book, stitch them

1. Ernest Buckler, The Cruelest Month, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1963, p. 47. All further references will appear in the body of the thesis as CM.

together with the thread of a story, and hope for the best. The themes listed in Orange's thesis are: Date's loss of youth; Morse's loss of talent; Sheila's loss of love; Paul's search for identity; Bruce's guilt; Rex's running; Letty as the representative of natural values; the urban wasteland; death as an existential fact of life; the destructive aspect of love; and words as an inadequate reflection of life. At first glance these themes do seem unrelated. However, if considered either as treatments of the theme of the artist and his art, or of the theme of self-delusion, the link between them becomes clear. All of the characters come to Paul's place because they are, in some way, orphaned or crippled. They leave believing they have been healed, once again made whole. Each character in the novel is either a healer, such as Sheila, Bruce, Letty and Date; or a patient, such as Rex, Paul and Morse. Ultimately, however, they all delude themselves that anything has changed. Buckler himself, in a letter to me written on March 4, 1972, says:

A thing that maybe hasn't been noticed too often (my fault that it isn't) is the prime tragedy of self-delusion. 1

Seen in this light, The Cruelest Month is not a novel going ten ways at once, but rather a novel in which the major theme is expressed in ten different, but not mutually exclusive, ways. This technique is suggestive of the way in which myth effects its purpose. As Edmund Leach says,

It is common to all mythological systems that all important stories recur in several different versions. Man is created in Genesis (Chapter I, verse 27) and then he is created all over again (II,7). And, as if two first men were not enough,

we also have Noah in chapter VIII. Likewise in the New Testament, why must there be four gospels each telling "the same" story yet sometimes flatly contradictory on details of fact? Buckler's use of the method of myth here is significant, since it indicates that he is coming to grips with one of the major problems considered in The Mountain and the Valley--that of the rural writer in an urban world. By using the general form of myth, he is adapting a primitive method of communication to the modern art of writing. Ellen is only a story-teller; Buckler goes one step further. By using a mythological format, he shows that he has become the writer David was unable to.

The secondary theme of The Cruelest Month, but the major theme of this paper, is that of the artist, and, more specifically, the writer. The Mountain and the Valley dealt with the problems of the maturing artist in his society. The Cruelest Month deals with the problems that the mature, successful writer has with his work. In effect, speaking through Morse Halliday as his surrogate, Buckler is giving his own views on the frustrations inherent in art.

The first problem is the inadequacy of language. In The Mountain and the Valley Buckler drew a portrait of an artist working outside the realm of words; Ellen's work of art, the rug, transcends language, communicates to a very limited audience. In some way words must be made to capture experience as the rug captured the Canaan family. Morse expresses his frustration at the defects of writing:

Writing was a mug's game. What hope in hell did you have of trapping thoughts and feelings in a net as coarse as words? It was like the ancients trying to enclose the

bird with a wall. (Cm, p. 149)

The second problem is time. Life happens too quickly to be enclosed completely in art. David, in the epilogue to The Mountain and the Valley, experienced this difficulty when, while climbing the mountain, he was bombarded by every sensation he experienced during his lifetime, and was almost driven insane by his attempt to translate them all at once. Morse also experiences this:

A writer needed ten lives. And he only had one. To do it right you'd have to experience all things first, then learn how to tell them, then tell them. But there was no time for that. You had to keep the three operations all going at once. Tolstoi thought the only thing he'd missed out on was a yacht race. My God, how foolish could you get?....How fast could anyone speak or type? Say a hundred words a minute. Never mind the hours spent writing it in and rubbing it out in his brain, or the long white days when not one word would come — just say he had it right at his fingertips. If he typed, or spoke, without a second's break, for seventy years, he couldn't physically get more than a grain of the whole truth down. If he had the sense Proust hadn't, he knew that. A penny compared to all those billions in the national debt....(CM, p.149)

Here Buckler shows his artistry in his understanding of the human condition. After Morse thinks for a long time (in the novel) about the fact that what can be written is so tiny a part of what has been experienced, Buckler has him condense all his thoughts into one short, terse comment to Kate:

"Can't you see? One man, one little hen scratch. It's so impossibly hopeless." (CM, p. 149)

As the rug stands for the Canaan family only in terms of remembrances, translated through the creative potential of Ellen: and as a novel only captures a miniscule part of life between its covers; so, too, Morse's comment is merely a precis of the amount of thought that it contains.

The third problem is that of subject. Is it important to write
everything down, or can a part stand for the whole, as speech represents only a part of thought? Morse says:

Granted that with the microscope your tool you engraved no more than a single comma of infinity on the head of a pin, how much better did the telescope serve you? What good was a bloody relief map if half the truth was in a blade of grass? When every damn thing in the world was sui generis? What good was an outline of the heart if the infinite subdivisions of human feeling defied the microscope even?

"You might as well type out the alphabet and say: There. That takes it all in." (CM, p. 150)

Significantly, for Date is Morse's physician, she provides the answer.

"But I don't care," Kate said. "Those inexpressible volumes you're so dismayed about. You do have a knack of writing them between the lines." (CM, p. 150)

Buckler obviously believes that a writer need not include everything in his work, but what he does include must at least be able to hint at the inexpressible volumes, as the rug speaks for so much more than can be superficially perceived. It is the work of metaphor and simile, the medium in which Buckler works, to in some way express the inexpressible, to allow one image to stand for the inexhaustible multitude of thoughts and feelings which led up to its choosing. The artist cannot hope to include everything in his writing, but he must attempt to express as much as his art will allow - the greater the artist, the more he can capture, and with greater clarity; but no man can hope to capture it all. If he can only touch a part of eternity, he has performed a miracle. As John Orange says:

Buckler's distinction between art and life seems to carry the implication that no work of art, no matter how perfectly rendered, can capture life truly. In fact, it seems that once the "artist figure" accepts the insuffi-
ciency of his art, he then frees himself to give full vent to his word-shaping impulses - even if it means loneliness and frustration. ¹

Finally, Morse mentions a concern only artists have, not with their art, but with themselves - the problem of not being able to create, and the despair caused by the realization that perhaps there was nothing there, after all. He says,

"Who's going to write it?"...."That's the whole point. I simply can't write it....anything....anymore." (CM, p. 152)

Morse then describes, in great detail, the writer's feelings when he can no longer write, when the problem is no longer to assimilate the multiplicity of ideas, to reduce them to a recognizable form, but to reactivate his creative consciousness:

"All of it still out there somewhere - but now you can't get your hands on a bit of it. If your fingers were thumbs before, they're protheses now. It's like trying to dip up triangles with a cup. And anything you get down is wrong. You know it's wrong, because that master page inside you stays white....white....white. Now that's one sweet colour!" (CM, p. 153)

When writing The Cruelest Month, Buckler must have felt a great deal of this frustration; much of the strained feeling the novel itself imparts reflects the difficulty he had in writing the book. In fact, that was part of Buckler's purpose, to give a graphic example, in the form of his novel, of the effect on a writer of the loss of his creative urge, along with the difficulty of "trapping thoughts and feelings in a net as coarse as words." (CM, p. 149) In a letter to me, he says,

You're right about Month sounding strained. Because it was the Morse in me who was writing it. And the strain

¹. Orange, pp. 11-12.
was, really, I like to think rather subtly, deliberate: to show how strained the alleged sophisticates can unconsciously come off.¹

Kate again supplies Morse's answer. She realizes that a great part of his problem is that he lacks a sounding-board, someone who will listen to him and thus remove his anger, leaving his creative powers free. Just as Morse needs a retreat from participation in life, so too he needs the chance to purge himself, and thus regain his objectivity. In effect, Buckler is saying again that a writer must remain somehow isolated from others, so that experience can have meaning beyond the ordinary interpretation placed on it by other men. Morse needs a buffer, and Date provides this by the simple expedient of being a good listener. Given the feeling that he is once more able to communicate with others, Morse begins writing again:

"I hadn't been able to write a word. And all at once everything I looked at was like a letter addressed to me. The day itself had my name on it. Do you know that feeling? I tried out a few words and they said, "Yes! Yes!"..... amongst themselves. They were still saying it the second time I looked at them. That's what it's like to be writing again....." (CM, p. 186)

Thus, in The Cruelest Month, Buckler has clearly delineated the principles of his art, as, in The Mountain and the Valley, he had shown the problem that the artist has in his relationship to his environment. The artist must be, to a great extent, an intimate part of his environment; this way he reduces the possibility of producing only a superficial understanding. Yet, he must also retain a distinct viewpoint. He

¹ Buckler, Letter of March 4, 1972, Appendix. This subtle delineation of city sophistication can also account for the earlier observed problem of phrases which do not, somehow, sound appropriate.
must be isolated enough from others that his perception becomes heightened, and therefore worthy of communication. He must translate, through this heightened or altered perception, something of the infinite vastness of life, with all its multiplicities and mysterious vagaries, in an admittedly inadequate media - the written word. He must somehow, in a Time which is eternally too short, convey something which is incapable of being conveyed, express the inexpressible - in a mutable language present the immutable.

The means by which he can do at least a part of this are clear. Buckler's ideal artist must be a part of his people, as David was originally. He must have a degree of objectivity, as Ellen did. He must, to present eternity, somehow suspend time. He must, in order to capture part of the vastness of life, deal in a microcosm which will illuminate the macrocosm. And, finally, he must deal in metaphor and simile, for only in these can the inexpressible be expressed.

All these Buckler does in his third novel, Ox Bells and Fireflies.
CHAPTER FIVE: OX BELLS AND FIREFLIES

In The Mountain and the Valley Buckler dealt with the qualities of the ideal artist. Some of these David Canaan possessed, but he lacked objectivity. His isolation lacked perspective, and the delusion that he could end it at any time he wished made of it a destructive, rather than a creative force. The problem of the artist, then, is to be an intimate part of his environment, as Ellen was, while at the same time being isolated enough that he can translate and interpret that environment in a way meaningful to others.

In Ox Bells and Fireflies Buckler solves this dilemma of the artist by the brilliant device of "The Double Consciousness". One consciousness is that of Mark, who is a character in the novel, and intimately involved in its action; the other consciousness is that of Buckler himself. This device is made clear in the opening sentence of the novel: "I'll call the village 'Norstead,' the boy 'I' "¹ In this way, David's dilemma of participatory involvement and aesthetic distance is overcome.

Moreover, this device allows Buckler to transport himself into his youth, which is transformed into Mark's present, and thus to defeat time; in this way the past and present are intimately linked into a whole. This technique is important, for it must articulate

¹. Ernest Buckler, Ox Bells and Fireflies, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1938, p. 3. All further references will appear in the body of the thesis as OB.
with the technique of memoir employed by Buckler in the book.

Buckler strongly objects to stories for the sake of stories, plots which hide the fact that the characters caught up in them are made of pasteboard. He has said of such characters that he often wished they would stand still for a moment, so that he could see what they were made of. All of his novels have, therefore, dealt with the insides of his characters - they have been notably short on plot and long on psychological detail. This coincides with Buckler's wish to achieve perfection in his writing as he perceives the demands of his craft.

In terms of his growth as a writer, this has led Buckler away from the use of plot as a major part of his art, and, as a result, into a structure in which timelessness becomes increasingly important. Internally, The Mountain and the Valley is set in a specific time and a specific place - David's life defines the time and Entremont is the place. The Cruelest Month is set in the time spent at Paul's place. Ox Bells and Fireflies, however, is set in memory, and thus escapes the confining sequence of Time. The village is not "Norstead," nor is the boy "I." They are only "called" that by the narrator.

Thus the boy, Mark, successfully combines the artistic aspects of both David and Ellen - he is uniquely a part of, yet separate from, his environment.

The second problem discussed in the earlier works is the problem of how, in a limited time, to record everything the writer experiences. Buckler, as has been shown, clearly favours the use of a microcosm to illuminate a macrocosm. Given the impossibility of capturing ever-
thing, the artist can only assume that the universal is contained in
the particular. Based on this assumption, it is the task of the writer
to attempt to capture the particular while at the same time suggesting,
in some way, its universal aspects. Buckler does this through the
related literary devices of metaphor and simile, at times often seeming
to over-use these figures in his eagerness to reproduce exactly his
experience. However, the times that this over-enthusiasm mars his
prose are few, since the reader looks specifically for him, in his
metaphors, to reflect the myriad depths and vagaries of life. Thus,
Ox Bells and Fireflies attempts to express creative insight and reve-
lation, not as a bolt from the blue, but out of an intimate awareness
of one's place in human experience:

    I mean, you'd be standing there on the bank of the
brook and the current you couldn't see beneath the dark
surface would be floating the water bubbles lazy as dream-
ing down the stream. The sun would be drowsing on your
back. Sounds themselves would have a little pocket of
stillness around them like rocks have. Your fishing pole
would be hanging slack from the alder pole into the pond-
like stillwater. And then suddenly the surge of a trout
would stretch your line taut and all at once your heart
would seem to spread out like a fan and you would know
exactly what troutness was. And brookness. And leafness.
And, yes, worldness and lifeness itself. You would move
right out — and gloriously — into everything around you.
(Ob, p. 52)

This is Buckler's forte, the area of literature in which he is
most powerful. In Chapter Twelve, Buckler spends five full pages giving
example after example of the ".....things.....that gave love an added
strength....." (Ob, p. 180), all of them illuminating his subject,
giving meaning in their multiplicity.

This, however, is not Buckler's only talent; if it were, his prose
would soon lose impact. He also shows, in his use of humour, the
ability to arrive at the essence of a situation. A perfect example is the recounting of an early love affair. Mark, the narrator, copies a long love letter from an ancient book on letter-writing, which includes the phrase:

"Your maidenly dignity has kept your heart so securely hidden that I scarcely venture to hope I have a place there."

(0B, p. 173)

During delivery, however, the letter is intercepted by the girl's mother, who recounts it to her mat-hothing group. Mark says,

"For a week after that just to walk along the road was torture. Someone was sure to straighten up from his weeding and call out: "Hi, there! Goin up to see her maidenly dignity?" The way "stories" stuck to people, a tag like that could haunt you for life."

(0B, p. 173)

_The Bell and Fireflies_ is not short of humour, but its most stunning quality is Buckler's skill in descriptive imagery. After reading a passage such as the following, one realizes that the author has, indeed, come close to capturing the moment perfectly:

"Once: You were cutting loop poles alone in the pasture, your consciousness spreading a little as always to fill the quiet. All around you was the living greenery in its infinite shapes. The saw-toothed edges of the sweet fern. The dancing-white stars of the blackberry blossoms. The pink pleating of the toadstool's lining. The purple loops of the sheepdill. The miniature chalices of the ground moss. The green-needled hackmatack with the bright-red cones which were like solid flowers cross-petaled as intricately as a rose.... There was not a pinpoint of earth where this infinite variety did not spring up side by side, yet not the smallest member of it without a purity of diagram to dumbfound gods or worlds."

(0B, p. 106)

Buckler's third novel is replete with instances that prove his use of metaphor was not lost in _The Cruelest Month_, as some critics feared, but was merely being used to a different purpose - that of giving the impression of strain. Here he returns to the description of the people
of the country, who are capable of communicating beyond the medium of words:

People whose senses graze always in the same pasture have a wordless intercourse circling among them without stop. So it was with these people. Their faces were steadily fluent with it, one to another. (OB, p. 160)

The format of Ox Bells and Fireflies is remarkably reminiscent of the rug that Ellen was constantly weaving in The Mountain and the Valley. Like the rug it has no discernable pattern in terms of a plot line, being instead a series of reminiscences, like the memories connected with the rags used to make up the rug. And, as a series of images suggest a meaning beyond those contained within them individually, so too the book, taken as a whole, is a memoir beyond the limits of the individual chapters. Buckler again utilizes the outward form of myth (although he is not mythologizing) to make his statement about the rural environment. In this book the technique is used somewhat differently than in The Cruelest Month, however. Instead of repeating the same story in a variety of ways, he is using a substantial number of individual vignettes, combined with stories about the people described in those vignettes, to comprise the entirety of that society. Susanne Langer says,

The great dreams of mankind, like the dreams of every individual man, are protean, vague, inconsistent, and so embarrassed with the riches of symbolic conception that every fantasy is apt to have a hundred versions. We see this in the numberless variants in which legends are handed down by peoples who have no literature.¹

Like a motion picture which suggests a meaning through a series of apparently unrelated images, the book eventually emerges as a complete picture of life the way it was in Buckler's youth. To re-emphasize this technique, Buckler has even included, in the chapter entitled "More Memory, or The's and And's," a microcosm of which the book is the macrocosm. Through a series of short, terse images, the unity of the novel is revealed, much as clusters of metaphors reveal their subject.

However, in order to present a true picture of the past, the author must be careful not to lapse into a treacly sentimentality, by either recalling only the good, or drawing a veil over suffering to make it seem not so bad. Buckler realizes this, and says,

This is memory then. And though memory may be a miracle - that you can sit where you are and send the mind skimming back over the rails of time and space, at will - there's no denying that it can be harping, misleading, and treacherously sentimental. (OB, p. 21)

To avoid this, one could easily attempt to consciously recall suffering and pain. Buckler goes further than this. Suffering is in the book, and pain, too. The book concerns itself with the lonely as well as with the loved. But the author attempts to explain the suffering, to see its relationship to the lives of those it affects. In the first chapter, Buckler deals with death, and he does not attempt to minimize the pain of the widow:

...Jim's wife Annie is sitting by the stove, plugging her handkerchief, her stricken face almost a childlike pink from tears parched dry. (OB, p. 13)

Yet Buckler is also able to see how death unites the living, in their mortality, and Mark emphasizes this:
He looks at Mother now. For a moment they look the way they do when they are working in the fields together, sowing seeds. When something comes out of them that is neither one of them but more than both. I take both their hands. I have never done this before. (OB, p. 18)

The final concern of Buckler's art is the inadequacy of language. This was dealt with earlier in The Cruellest Month, and constituted a large part of Morse's frustration. In the end, he deludes himself that he has regained his vision in this respect, that he is capable of capturing life. He says,

I know I've got it right now. Dead right.....will you help me get it down absolutely true? Once and for all? (CM, p. 284)

However, Kate speaks for Buckler when she realizes that no writer can ever achieve that degree of perfection:

You'll never get it right, she thought. No writer ever gets it right. How can they get it true to life when life's not true to itself? (CM, p. 284)

In Ox Bells and Fireflies Buckler repeats this belief, when Mark thinks,

(Not yet the ravage of the perfect moment by the need to grasp it entire; knowing that all you ever find in grasp's palm when its fingers open up again in echo.) (OB, p. 33)

But if the moment cannot be captured, still the artist must make the attempt, because these things did exist, and they should not be lost for lack of trying. Because in that attempt, the attempt to trap light, there is a special, unique freedom:

And there were songs the colour of poppies....and roof's the sound of sleep....and thoughts the taste of swimming.....and voices the touch of bread.....

And fireflies and freedom.....
And fireflies and freedom. (OB, p. 302)
In Ox Bells and Fireflies, then, Buckler has presented a work of art uniquely his own, in a style and using a format which has grown organically from those employed in The Mountain and the Valley and The Cruelest Month. The narrator, combined with the protagonist Mark, is a skillful combination of the characters of David Canaan and his grandmother, Ellen. And the novel exemplifies the theories on writing expressed by Morse Halliday.

On Ox Bells and Fireflies, his last work to date, Ernest Buckler should have the final word:

I agree with you that Oxbells is my best book. There, I think I've come through all the apprentice stuff, through all (or at least some of) the fevers and the provings (if there is such a word) and the strainings of my previous work. I felt sort of "easy" in that book, not busting a gut to establish some thesis - just (to use that over-worked expression) "telling it how it was."

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

I have attempted to show in this thesis how intimately connected the novels of Ernest Buckler are, and to what extent they encompass the views of an important Canadian writer on the subject of his art. In three books, Ernest Buckler has presented a comprehensive picture, dealing with the problem of what, in the make-up of a man, produces a writer, and what the problems of exercising his art entail. He has done this in a unique manner - by giving the reader a picture of a man who has the creative urge but is unable to exercise it; by discussing the frustrations of a writer who has great difficulty in coming to grips with the problems that his works present him with; and finally by producing a novel which fulfills all of his conditions for art, narrated by a man who fulfills all of his conditions for a writer. Buckler has given a semi-auto-biographical account of the development of a literary artist. On reading the novels in succession the reader sees displayed before him Buckler's struggle for his métier.

The Mountain and the Valley is the most difficult of the three novels, for it deals with the internal make-up of an artist by presenting a man who just falls short of that quality. David Canaan is set apart from others by his sensitivity, his understanding and his exceptional intelligence. He is also creative, but is unable to express that creativity because he is basically an observer of life, not a participator. In the book, Buckler has also presented a picture of the artist who participates so fully in life that her creativity is understandable
only to someone completely at home in her environment. To an outsider, Ellen's rug is simply a hand-woven rug, of no more consequence than the tenderloin of the pig. It is a work of art only when Buckler, through words, informs us of the meaning behind its creation. The writer cannot isolate himself as Ellen does, in her culture. Neither must he retire completely into his own mind, as David does - aware of his ability to use words to communicate, but unable to do so because, by not participating in life, he has nothing to say. A writer must be able to use both participation and communication. His work is to translate, to others, his perceptions, through words.

After having dealt thoroughly with the figure of the writer, Buckler now turns to the theory of writing. Although it is true that the major theme of *The Cruelest Month* is that of self-delusion, and that most of the secondary thematic problems of the novel can be resolved in the light of this theme, still there are parts of the book which cannot be explained by relating them only to self-delusion. Morse's views on writing are a clear example of this.

Since he is presented as a successful writer who has only temporarily lost his ability to write, an ability which is finally regained, his theories on his art cannot be dismissed as delusion, although his personal actions may be. In fact, Morse's views strongly parallel the views of Ernest Buckler himself, and in the final novel, *Ox Bells and Fireflies*, these theories are linked with the ideal artist who is presented, through his absence, in *The Mountain and the Valley*.

*Ox Bells and Fireflies* is Ernest Buckler's most accomplished work.
After the apprenticeship of his earlier novels, he has combined an ideal artist with an excellent example of the practice of the theories expounded by Morse Halliday. This brings him close to the technique of myth-making. As Susanne Langer says,

Myth,......at least at its best, is a recognition of natural conflicts, of human desire frustrated by non-human powers, hostile oppression, or contrary desires; it is a story of the birth, passion, and defeat by death which is man's common fate. Its ultimate end is not wishful distortion of the world, but serious envisagement of its fundamental truths;......Because it presents, however metaphorically, a world picture, an insight into life generally, not a personalized biography, myth tends to become systematized;......Moreover, because the mythical hero is not the subject of an egocentric day-dream, but a subject greater than any individual, he is always felt to be superhuman, even if not quite divine. He is at least a descendant of the gods, something more than a man. His sphere of activity is the real world, because what he symbolizes belongs to the real world, no matter how fantastic its expression may be.....

Myth, in its use of symbolism, thus employs the principle of metonymy. As Buckler has been seen to attempt to infuse writing, a modern art, with some of the principles of the more primitive art represented by the creations of Ellen, it is not surprising that he chooses the related literary devices of metaphor and simile, which are also part of the principle of metonymy, as his method of writing. These have the added advantage of reinforcing the decline in emphasis on action which Buckler undergoes. Metaphor and simile become the means by which he catches at the exact nature of life, much as symbolism of the supra-real is the means by which myth attempts to understand actual experience.

1. Langer, p. 143
The three works thus reveal consistent threads of development. The figure of the artist is examined closely, the theories of art are propounded, and the result is a brilliant example of the two working in almost perfect harmony. Ernest Buckler is a careful, consummate craftsman, and in his three novels has presented one of the most comprehensive portraits of the artist-figure to ever appear in Canadian Literature.
RESUME OF LETTERS TO BUCKLER

My first letter to Ernest Buckler was of an extremely general sort - I asked him if he would consider helping me in my task of writing a thesis based on his works, and included a copy of my original Prospectus. That Prospectus can also be found in this appendix. Due to the letters written by Buckler, and my own increased consideration of his works, the final form of the thesis has deviated quite extensively from my original conception of the problems posed by Buckler's writings.

The second letter embodied these changes. In it, I questioned the author about such problems as David as the artist who does not know how to write, and The Mountain and the Valley as essentially Buckler's example of how he should have gone about his art. I also saw Ellen as the artist who is at home with Buckler's method, for she is completely at home in her environment, while David is drastically isolated.

Concerning The Cruelest Month, I asked if the characters were known to the author, and tried to connect Morse to David as a failed artist. I was attempting to ascertain the reason for the peculiar strained feeling which the novel imparts to the reader.

I suggested that Ox Bells and Fireflies was an example of how a book written by Ellen would sound, for the narrator is both part of and apart from the novel.

Finally, I commented about the problem of Time - David is trapped by it, The Cruelest Month concerns itself with a retreat from it, and Ox Bells and Fireflies is set outside of it. I suggested that perhaps
an artist, at least the type of artist Buckler is, must reject time in
his art, in order to express the inexpressible, for if he does not the
sheer impossibility of saying everything in time would cause him to
forsake his work, as did Morse.

Although I have thanked him for the time he has taken in writing
to me, I feel that a special note of gratitude is appropriate here. A
reading of the two letters contained in this appendix will easily ex-
plain why.
PROSPECTUS - William R. Walker

I propose to study the three novels of Ernest Buckler to discover with the utmost accuracy and in the greatest detail the situation of the artist in Canada, in its national peculiarity. I have chosen Ernest Buckler as the subject of my study because both the circumstances of his life and the character of his work make him especially representative of the phenomenon upon which I wish to throw some light.

Serious literary criticism in Canada has been accorded to very few writers, most of whom are now dead or past their productive period. The central discovery of this criticism is summarized in the words (perhaps not the best, but certainly, by way of currency, the most influential) of Desmond Pacey in the concluding chapter of his widely-read book, Creative Writing in Canada:

The artistic response to these geographical conditions is difficult to resolve into a neat formula. Nor- throp Frye... chose to describe it as 'the evocation of stark terror', but this phrase, suggestive as it is, is not sufficiently inclusive. Terror there is in Canadian literature—terror of the wilderness, of storm and flood, of savages and of the intense extremes of cold and heat. But there is also exultation, the fascination as well as the fear of great strength. Perhaps the most inclusive phrase for the dominant reaction, though even it is not fully satisfying, is the expression of a sense of awe. (Creative Writing in Canada, p. 277)
Canada provides much scope for this view of the land and of the awe which it can invoke; areas where drought can destroy homesteads, or where a sudden blizzard can decimate an entire town. However, it is obvious to the most casual reader that since the late Twenties Canadian Writers, though they have not abandoned completely themes generated by the physical wilderness (for example, Birney's "David" and "Bushed") have, with increasing urgency, swung the full focus of their art upon another "wilderness" which I shall designate, provisionally, as the cultural one.

The purpose of my work is to throw some light on the contemporary Canadian artist as he seeks to make conscious a vision of his spiritual situation in a cultural milieu which is, comparatively, rudimentary. I wish to make clear the techniques and forms he adopts, either by imitation or invention, to embody his vision; the range and specificity of his attitudes towards the constituent elements of his cultural milieu: social, political, economic, religious; his attitude towards and use of the leading ideas of other cultures; his sense of "mission", and the form it takes; the sources to which he goes for sustenance in time of trial; the particular character of his "victories" and "defeats";
the values he nourishes and seeks to introduce
into the national life. In short, I wish to shed
as much light as I can on the inner, creative life
of the modern Canadian artist.

I have said that Ernest Buckler is especially
representative of this kind of man, because of the
circumstances of his life and the character of his
work. He was born in Nova Scotia, which, of all
the provinces, because of its long history, is
furthest removed from the physical wilderness. John
Cabot officially discovered the new land in 1497,
and British stock took firm root with the founding
of Halifax in 1749, after the Peace of Aix-la-Chap-
elle. It is reasonable to assume that the artists
of this province, because of their more prolonged
experience of the "second wilderness", will reflect
it in their work with greater definition. Moreover,
in his early twenties, Buckler "left home" for a
period of seven years, and returned by deliberate
choice; this "going away and return" is a spiritual
necessity attested to by the lives of countless
artists. Finally, throughout his writing Buckler
has, with remarkable single-mindedness, directed
his art upon the spectacle, crucial to the quality
of the national life, of the creative man in the
Canadian cultural wilderness.
Bridgetown, N.S.  

Dear William Walker:

Thank you very much for your kind letter. It always astonishes me that Canadian writers being the obscurities they are, anyone has ever heard of me. Sure, I'm approachable. Writers (and all writers are fundamentally way less than ploughmen or bricklayers) who abstain themselves into ivory towers where the password is "nowelle vague," or some such shit, give me a vivid pain in the ass.

All the same, I'm not at all sure that I can help you much. (Do you mind that my typing is appalling and that my syntax is worse? Do you mind if I just ramble on and let the clinkers of observation fall where they may?) Because (if you'll go back to my starting sentence: parentheses are the most unpardonable hiccoughs in decent writing) writers hardly ever know what they've said or meant to say until some astute critic points it out to them. They're the worst self-critics or self-annotaters in God's world.

But to zero in on your chief consideration: the isolation of the Canadian writer both physically and culturally. Well, I don't worry too much about the "cultural" aspect. What is culture, by and large? A bunch of alleged sophisticates who are, as it were, and as I've said somewhere, fartat will. I like the country because, to put it quite baldly, here's where you get down to the guts of the whole business. Granted, the writer isolated here tends to get sophisistic and, as it were (if you'll pardon the vulgarity analogy), keep fucking off his own cock. On the other hand (no pun intended, masturbatorily), if he goes abroad into the company of what I think they call his "peers," there is the worse tendency of them all to rub themselves off against each other.

Sure, the Canadian country is pretty dismaying. All those bleak expenses where your voice, however strong and penetrating, cannot hope to be heard above the fucking Rotarian's quines's or the Wolves'? But this very loneliness is the thing that gives a writer the time and the impulse to record. What oyster, if it were not irritated, would produce the pearl? What whale, if it were not sick, would produce the ambergris? And more, much more, than that, there is the only place where one can see, right down to the very subllest, the embodiment in correlative, for example, physical form of every conceivable feeling. (Where can you find a sidewalk?) Such isolation is piercingly painful, for example (those blazing sunsets with their Hiagres of biblical light accusing you of never having properly said what beauty is; those twiter fuses which assault you with the memories of those you once loved — and still do — but who don't love you anymore...) but such pain is a tax I'm prepared to pay for release from the citily impervious.

(over)
I'm sorry this is such a shambled letter, but I'm ill (hell, I'm sick; don't you hate people who say "ill" when they mean "sick"?), and it's the best I can do. In any case, I thank you heartily for your interest and wish you all best luck with your thesis.

Sincerely,

Ernest Buckler

P.S. John Orange's (isn't that an odd name?) is a dandy (although, I understand it is "reserved" at the U. of T. library until 1975.) He points out where I go halfway right and where I simply fall flat on my bloody ass. Another thesis which pleased me is Bernita Harris's at U.N.B. (Whether or not this is available anywhere I don't know.) She centered on "The Cruelest Month" — my second novel, an acknowledged disaster in nearly every way, and yet as you love a crippled child more shriveling than you do your normal one, one that I rather defend, because it sets forth the fundamental things (No, OXEBEES does it better) I believe in. She is also the most delectably handsome chick I've ever set my eyes on — but that's a different kettle of fishion.
Bridgetown, N.S.
March 4, 1972.

Dear Bill Walker:

Thanks ever so much for another generous letter. I am still sick as a dog and beset by difficulties that put the Perils of Pauline to shame (incidentally, I think that only sick people write; hell, if they had all the things open to them that are open to the well, why would they bury themselves in the chirping of words?), but I'll try to say a few coherent things. Please forgive the syntax; it will be hopelessly tangled, because I'm in no sense of the word a "natural" writer; it takes me hours to turn out a presentable note to the milkman even. But I think you'll be kind enough in this case to bear with me without my taking the usual hours to rub the sweat signs on my sentences out.

I think your points are all well taken. As I said to you before, I think, I'm no good at commenting on my own work (no writer is) (And please pardon all the parentheses that may be coming up; the worst hiccoughs in decent prose.) I agree with you that Oxbells is my best book. There, I think I've come through all the apprentice stuff, through all (or at least some of) the fevers and the provings (if there is such a word) and the strainings of my previous work. I felt sort of "easy" in that book, not busting a gut to establish some thesis — just (to use that overworked expression) "telling it how it was." You're right about Month sounding strained. Because it was the Morse in me who was writing it. And the strain was, really, I like to think rather subtly, deliberate; to show how strained the alleged sophisticates can unconsciously come off. Here, a word about your question about "citification" vs. rural values. That's been a thing with me all along. Now, I must confess that I'm having grave doubts about this black-and-white bit. I'm not so sure now that there aren't lots of city people who are not of the type who swarm the blindfold streets or the cocktail shithouses, who are just as (if not, on occasion, more; well, like you, man) kind and friendly and understanding as my soil-brothers. (The pun is another of my besetting sins.) You know (do you mind wild tangents?), I just typoed "king" for "kind"; maybe there is a resemblance there. You ask if I knew the people in Month. Yes, I did. I spent a long line of summers while I was putting myself through college, in Greenwich, Connecticut, working at a grand summer hotel — where I met Sheila, etc. (Of course, I met Paul and Bruce and Morse et.al. in myself.) (Which is where you meet all the people you really know. Talk about schizophrenia. Everyone is not only a split personality; he has at least two dozen selves.)
The time thing. I think you're right in your observations here. Although I honestly wouldn't know. I didn't deliberately put this consideration in, but maybe there it is, just as you say. I'd only have one comment on this, re. your statement of Morse's (he's the bastard in me) finding "the communication he so desperately needs." It's what he does, indeed, need so desperately -- but he's never conscious of this. He's the guy who thinks (sadly mistakenly) that he is above dependence of any fucking kind.

A thing that maybe hasn't been noticed too often (my fault that it isn't) is the prime tragedy of self-delusion. David (and he's sometimes an insufferable little prick) might not have been, probably never would have been, a great writer. At the end of Month (by the way, a movie may be made of this one), Sheila, with the baby coming, thinks that life with Rex has altered totally. Whereas this new "report" would probably not last for six months. Sssh! Kate. Sssh! that this new compassion or whatever which Morse is showing would make him the writer he had it in him to be, whereas, by having cut his stinger out, she has also cut off his balls, so to speak. He sees, the way her speech goes now, that she's not a little pain silly. Paul (me, somehow again) deludes himself that this new thing with Letty has made a different man of him and scuttled totally the yoke of (I ask you, how can one scuttle a yoke? Sorry) whatever his yoke is... whereas there's no doubt that within the week he'd have found her nothing like enough for him. But, yes, how we handle time is what we are (that sounds like Flip Wilson, doesn't it!), and I think you've hit on some excellent points here. The ending of Month has been thought to be a cliche' happy ending. It's anything but. The idea was (though I didn't present it, I guess, explicitly enough) that sadly, sadly, sadly, however much they con themselves, people, after a certain time, can't change.

I'm sorry that this is not a helpful letter. I've just piled confusion on confusion. But isn't that life? Who can see straight? I suppose that's the question in all my work; Who can see straight? Nobody. Not even the Pauls.

Sincerely,
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Novels by Ernest Buckler


Short Stories by Ernest Buckler

1) From Maclean's Magazine.


"Quarrel", 62 (January 15, 1949), 5-6, 24+.

"Last Stop Before Paradis", 62 (June 1949), 22-23, 49.

"School and Me", 62 (September 1, 1949), 30, 44+.

"Clumsy One", 63 (August 1, 1950), 8-9, 28-30.


"Rebellion of Young David", 64 (November 15, 1951), 22-23, 36-38.

2) From The Atlantic Advocate.


"Glance in the Mirror", 47 (January 1957), 53, 55.

"By Any Other Name", 47 (June 1957), 48, 79-80.

"In Case of Emergency", 47 (August 1957), 69-72.

"Cleft Rock, With Spring", 48 (October 1957), 89-90.


"Concerto", 48, (May 1958), 75-77.
"There Oughta Be A Law", 50 (September 1959), 76-77.
"Wild Goose", 50 (October 1959), 91-95.
"Long, Long After School", 50 (November 1959), 42-44.
"Nettles into Orchids", 51 (August 1961), 70-71.
"Non!", 52 (September 1961), 59-60.
"One Sweet Day", 52 (January 1962), 49-51, 53.
"Guilt on the Lily", 53 (August 1963), 61-69.

**Articles on Ernest Buckler**


**Collections of Buckler Memorabilia**

Buckler, Ernest. Buckler Collection. University of Toronto Library, Archives and Rare Books Library.
Book Reviews

1) On The Mountain and the Valley

Saturday Night, Volume 68, December 13, 1952, 38.
University of Toronto Quarterly, Volume 22, April 1953, 288, 290-292.

2) On The Cruelest Month

Canadian Literature, Number 19, Winter 1964, 58-59.
Queen's Quarterly, Volume 71, Summer 1964, 277.
University of Toronto Quarterly, Volume 33, July 1964, 396-397.
Tamarack Review, Number 36, Summer 1965, 82-86.

3) On Ox Bells and Fireflies

Atlantic Advocate, Volume 59, December 1968, 56.
Alphabet, Number 16, September 1969, 66-69.
Canadian Author and Bookman, Volume 44, Summer 1969, 16.
Canadian Literature, Number 40, Spring 1969, 91-92.
Queen's Quarterly, Volume 76, Autumn 1969, 546-547.
University of Toronto Quarterly, Volume 38, July 1969, 355-356.

Theses


VITA AUCTORIS


1963 - Graduated from William Lyon Mackenzie Collegiate Institute, Toronto, Ontario, S.S.G.D.

1971 - Graduated from Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Honors Bachelor of Arts.