Translating the Frame: Rereading *The Mountain and the Valley*

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The ending of *The Mountain and the Valley* is notoriously difficult to interpret: Is David Canaan's death on the mountaintop meant to be tragic or ironic? Since its publication in 1952, these somewhat irreconcilable possibilities, along with Ernest Buckler's challenging prose style, have inspired uneasiness—often verging on outright exasperation—even in readers who regard it as, on the whole, a great novel. How we read the ending will ultimately affect how we make sense of Buckler's narrative strategies throughout this novel; in fact, the ending demands a return to the beginning. Rereading the novel turns out to be crucial, for a close scrutiny of both epilogue and prologue uncovers a strong basis for reading David's entire story as functioning on one of its levels as a metaphor for shifting states of consciousness. Buckler's low-key remark that David's death "was to be the crowning point of the whole dramatic irony (and, of course, the most overt piece of symbolism in the book)" (quoted in Young 36), appears then to be something of an understatement.

The Jungian notion of a limited self confronting his own shadow worked out in the penultimate chapter gives way in the epilogue to David's encounter with what Jung would call the transpersonal self. The clearly delineated stages of David's ascent up the mountain also closely mirror the

ESC 36.2–3 (June/September 2010): 165–188

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four levels or modes of consciousness described in the *Upanishads*. Both of these symbolic paradigms presume that self-awareness may undergo a series of progressive *translations* from one state of consciousness to another. This idea of "translation," repeated so emphatically in the epilogue, may then further illuminate one of the key paradoxes of *The Mountain and the Valley*: that a novel which overtly explores the wounds inflicted by the spoken or the unspoken word, and the flaws and limitations inherent in language and narrative as a whole, still subliminally affirms their potential to be in a profoundly transformative relationship with the mystery that exists beyond the reach of both. Marta Dvorak, in her groundbreaking study of his entire body of work, has already examined in detail the paradoxical effects of Buckler's rhetorical strategies and his use of the notion of "translation" (88–89), most affirmatively in relation to *Ox Bells and Fireflies*. Yet, Dvorak sees David as a "failed artist" and his death as ultimately ironic (108). What I intend to explore here, building on the foundation which Dvorak has so ably constructed, is how that ending may be reread symbolically along the lines that Buckler has carefully encoded within the very structure and language of the novel as a whole.

Rereading David's story in this way instigates a strangely charged relationship between reader and narrator, as well as reader and text. Reader and omniscient narrator jointly observe David's progress through the novel and up the mountain, but, since carefully rereading this novel results in a growing sense of its structural and stylistic asymmetries, the narrator's vantage point in relation to the unfolding narrative becomes an increasingly pressing question. While observing these shifting spaces, Marta Dvorak wonders if "we readers also end up looking at the eye of our own watching" (100); in other words, a certain alienating space opens up not only between reader and text but *within* the reader as well.[1] Paul Ricoeur explains that "the matter of the text becomes my own only if I disappropriate myself, in order to let the matter of the text be. So I exchange the *me*, *master* of itself, for the *self*, *disciple* of the text" (*From Text to Action* 36–37). Such creative processes of alienation play a necessary role in the interactions between reader and text, Ricoeur asserts, partly because both are, to some degree at least, fictitious:

> [I]f fiction is a fundamental dimension of the reference of the text, it is no less a fundamental dimension of the subjectivity

1 Another "gap" with which Buckler is preoccupied, Dvorak notes, is that "between being and essence": in attempting to bridge this gap, "his narrators contemplate themselves in the act of contemplating, his protagonists describe themselves describing and think of themselves thinking" (100).

> of the reader. As a reader, I find myself only by losing myself. Reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the ego. The metamorphosis of the world in play is also the playful metamorphosis of the ego. (*From Text to Action* 88)

Ernest Buckler's novel plays with the potential metamorphoses of text *and* ego, by focusing simultaneously on the unavoidable limits of expression and insight and on moments that translate the paradigmatic constructs of self and story into something more fluid and open.[2]

The epilogue begins: "David stood at the window now, watching the highway" (*MV* 274); this sentence takes the reader back to a moment already described in exactly the same words in the prologue (7). Reminded of this "now," the reader realizes that the main narrative, contained within the frame device of prologue and epilogue, has been the unfolding of memories occurring within a moment's brief reverie. *Whose* reverie remains unclear: arguably it is David's, but the narrative voice moves in and out of Ellen's thought processes as well as David's in both prologue and epilogue. Within that reverie—in other words, in the main body of the novel—the flow of narrative time has been often held in check quite noticeably while the narrator lingers over the evocation of a moment, a landscape, or a sensation. The beginning of the epilogue underscores the malleability of time in this text: "Now" the narrator marshals the reader back to the narrative's "present." However, the "now" with which the epilogue begins was only a fleeting moment at the beginning of "Prologue—The Rug." By the end of the prologue David has escaped the kitchen, leaving his grandmother alone with her memories as she handles different pieces of the family's clothing. In this prologue, the narrator has contrasted a clock-like movement of time with an inner subjective experience of "now," focusing on the staccato heat tick of the stove, the "tick, tick, tick, of emptiness" that David feels, and the mat hook moving in his grandmother's hand like "the sounds of seconds dropping" (7). This almost tactile experience of time both passing and standing still, coupled with the disappearance of the adult David from the stream of his grandmother's consciousness, is the bridge that leads to the beginning of David's story as a young boy in "Part One—The Play."

2 Paul Ricoeur has said, in his discussion of Frank Kermode's "premature" solution to the problem of how fiction and reality interact, that he finds it both permissible and productive "to hold in reserve other possible relationships … than that of consolation reduced to a vital lie. Transfiguration, as well as defiguration; transformation, as well as revelation, also have their right to be preserved" (*Time and Narrative* 2:27–28).

Being required to shift from one plane of narrative to another leads the reader into a zone that Ricoeur has characterized as the "active distanciation of the future from the past … [allowing] for the measurement of time not as a past or future thing but as an expectation or memory" (quoted in Chamberlain 65–66). But whose consciousness is it that guides, contains, or is subject to the flow of memories that constitute David's "story"? From what vantage point does the narrator guide readers back to the "now" of the epilogue? David's voice and persona often seem closest to the narrator's, but who, then, is the narrator, since the ending of the epilogue is almost, but not quite, coincident with David's death? The status of this omniscient narrator is relatively without problems until the reader examines the misalignment of prologue and epilogue. Shifting pronouns and verb tenses throughout the epilogue (and, to a lesser degree, the entire novel) also opens up gaps in any attempt to locate a consistent narrative perspective. Noting the spaces which open up in what had appeared to be a fairly straightforward, relatively linear storyline, the reader becomes conscious above all of the *design* of the text, a design which emphasizes but also ultimately defies the "exact" interrelationship of cause and effect that so fascinates David in the epilogue (290).

One level of this design is undoubtedly Buckler's will to manifest a preconceived plan, to orchestrate the "dramatic irony" of his characters' lives (quoted in Young 36). Toby and Anna arrive home precisely in time to prevent the Canaan family from going to cut down the tree that will eventually fall on Joseph and kill him (*MV* 168); a wind blows "exactly" in such a way that Joseph does not hear Martha's "absolving voice" before his death (213; 294). David never knows that he was not responsible for Effie's death because her mother cannot grasp the word "leukemia" (146). Ellen refuses to tell stories related to her inner experiences (25), thus depriving David of an important source of insight into his own nature. Elements such as these make inescapable and obtrusive the sense of a wilful design at work in the progress of the narrative. Control, mastery, or the lack thereof occurs most acutely in the handling of language, whether by the author/narrator or the characters themselves: language throughout the whole of the novel figures as the "one way to possess anything … captured and conquered" (189). At the same time, language is the most potent destroyer of families and individuals, especially when it is a matter of refusing to speak, of maintaining a wilful silence.

On another level, the meaning of the novel as a whole seems to reside in examining the "wilful design" that dictates David's life experiences, this time as an intrinsic part of his own flawed character. Wilfully isolating

himself from others, unable or unwilling to bring to fruition any of his grandiose ideas or hopes, Buckler's David may be a portrait of a weak ego, or of the perversity of human nature, or of the plight of an artist in the midst of a community that neither understands nor provides him with the means to express himself. Whatever the causes to which readers choose to attribute David's downward spiral, and whether they ultimately see it as tragic or ironic, this is a portrait of real psychological force. Jung's characterization of a man possessed by his own shadow fits David well: "In the long run luck is always against him, because he is living below his own level and at best only attains what does not suit him. And if there is no doorstep for him to stumble over, he manufactures one for himself and then fondly believes he has done something useful" ("Rebirth" 123). By the end of the novel, David's creative potential consumes itself within meticulous daily rituals: "Each day's routine immobilized him by its very immediacy. It had to be cleared away, extinguished, before the real nowness began. Each tomorrow (never doubted, in prospect, as a break in the repetition of today), itself becoming today, was repetitive nonetheless" (*MV* 221). David's final journey up the mountain may be read as the last act in a drama of progressive self-strangulation in pursuit of absolute control, of complete and isolated agency. He now has no "inside" other than "a great white naked eye of self-consciousness" (275); abandoning his lone remaining family member, he "fabricate[s]" a last encounter with an old friend (278); and after one final, ecstatic flare-up of self-glorification, a heart attack puts an end to the patterns readers have watched take hold of him throughout his story (294).

The novel's narrative frame, extreme preoccupation with language, and character development all support such a reading.

Buckler has said that he conceived of the novel's ending first: "I tried to get my characters straight right at the start—to know exactly where they were going to wind up" ("My First Novel" 23). His use of the word "exactly"—a word which recurs obsessively in David's thoughts in the epilogue—does little to reassure readers that the *author's* need to control his characters and his text is any less problematic than David's own desire for mastery. Consequently, left with the images of David's body being buried in falling snow and a partridge hurtling downward out of the sky, readers might end by seeing *The Mountain and the Valley* as offering a highly self-conscious picture of the failings inherent within language, art, and the human personality. The novel's narrative frame, extreme preoccupation with language, and character development all support such a reading. However, while Buckler dictates both David's choice of path and final end, he also infuses the narrative frame, David's character, and his own prose with powerfully alternative impulses.

In a sense, the entire narrative frame seems quite unnecessary, since the last sentence before the epilogue begins provides readers with a fitting end to David's story:

> The pail of skim milk was almost more than his left arm could support on the way to the barn, but he didn't shift it to the right or set it down, halfway, and rest. Something unplastic, unbent, unshuffling in him, still drove straight ahead. His father, Joseph, would keep chopping as long as he could see, though his axe was dull and his feet were cold and the rest of the crew had given in to the blizzard hours ago. (*MV* 273)

The main narrative closes with David's ongoing attempts to be like his father and the smothering of his own very different talents. Shifting to the epilogue at this point, far from smoothly closing the frame set up in the prologue, instead emphasizes that frame's openness and asymmetry. Consciously experiencing this asymmetry, which is intensified considerably in rereading the novel, then provokes a corresponding shift in focus from David's experiences in the past (within the frame) to the narrating consciousness telling his story in the present (outside the frame). Doubles simultaneously of David and of each other, reader and narrator begin to function as complicated variations of the two selves written about in the "Mundaka Upanishad": "two birds … dwell on the self-same tree. The one eats the fruits thereof, and the other looks on in silence" (80). As the reader moves into alignment with this "observer" who relates (to) David's story, his life and death then begin to assume even more overtly the status of metaphor. Marta Dvorak points out that "metaphor is a trope that, like irony, generates double vision … for the 'accumulated intension' of words, according to Urban, is the source of fertile ambiguity and of the symbolic power of language, allowing the writer to name realities for which language has, and can have, no proper term" (221). The double (or quadruple) vision instigated by the presence of both irony *and* metaphor in David's ending takes readers far beyond a merely tragic or anti-climactic picture of a failed artist.

Robert Gibbs comes closest to affirming a strong counter-design at work in the novel. Speculating that the falling partridge may be supposed to represent "David's soul flying out of its valley" (302), he further points out that the paradoxes and musicality built into the variations of narrative voice and the harmony "within the broken lines of Ellen's thought" (298) resist the enclosing frame so that "this well-closed book [is], in a way, unclosed" (302). Yet Gibbs also sees David as failing to transcend his errors

and limitations (301–02). Alan Young and Claude Bissell find transcendent moments in David's ascent up the mountain and in his earlier performance during a school play, but they too end by pointing out the collapse of those moments into the overarching irony of the final scene. The ironic aspects of the novel are many: the excruciating gap between David's potential and its miserly expression, the way his desire for control causes him to suppress his own best qualities, and the fact that his death occurs at the moment of his epiphany are some of the most obvious. Some readers find further irony in the fact that Buckler himself seems to be implicated in the failings of his main character (Fee 71), while still others have observed that the "crowning irony" (Orange 52) of the novel's ending is that *Buckler* has written the book that David failed to write (Seaman, Young, Fee, Van Rys). Reading David's death as a failure to actualize his potential—and his final vision on the mountaintop as a parody of mystical enlightenment—is clearly a valid and indeed a necessary interpretation.

However, Northrop Frye has this to say about one "puzzling fact of modern literature": "Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it" (42). How "sacrificial rituals and dying gods" might pertain to David's ending on the mountain will be dealt with a little further on. First, it is important to note that, like metaphor, irony may trigger in an open-ended and ultimately constructive way simply a "recognition of incongruities" (Brooks 209). Observing incongruity in the disjunction of epilogue and prologue, for instance, opens up a temporal plane in relation to the text in which reader encounters narrator at some remove from the temporality at work in the central part of the narrative. When the text moves into and out of the main body of the narrative, the question of "Who is speaking?" becomes also a question of "From where is one speaking?" (Ricoeur, quoted in Chamberlain 74). With this question, the reader enters the space of metaphor wherein "lies a fundamental 'non' sense.... It is not speech but the silence from which speech emerges. It is an awareness, an experience prior to any subject/object opposition. It precedes even such basic dichotomies as birth/death" (Chamberlain 18). Within this space, further ways of interpreting the layers of metaphor at work in the epilogue come to light.

In "Prologue—The Rug," David's grandmother is described as making a rug with scraps of old clothing once belonging to members of the Canaan family. Its design is "not intricate. It had a wide dark border, then a target pattern of circles radiating from the centre of the canvas" (*MV* 9).

Ellen continues to work on this rug in the epilogue, its progress coinciding with David's journey up the mountain; it is completed at the moment of his death. That this rug is mandala-shaped,[3] and that Ellen works her way closer to its centre as David climbs the mountain to its peak, suggests that Buckler has framed his narrative with archetypal images of self-discovery and self-transformation, even as Ellen creates her rug within a frame, reworking the threads of her family's lives like some goddess of fate. Factor in the malleability of time in the text, a narrator who is both akin to and distant from the character of David, and the resulting discord between David's death and the telling of his story, and readers may begin to suspect that they have encountered a representation of the timeless, transpersonal world of the psyche.[4]

The "self" is, according to Jung, a "psychic totality" imaged as both circle and "centre, neither of which coincides with the ego but includes it, just as a larger circle encloses a smaller one" ("Rebirth" 141). Mandalas are circular forms (as is the novel), which have as their

> basic motif … the premonition of a centre of a personality, a kind of central point within the psyche, to which everything is related, by which everything is arranged…. The energy of the central point is manifested in the almost irresistible compulsion and urge to *become what one is*. (Jung, "Mandala Symbolism" 357)

Once the language and symbology of the final chapter have been thoroughly explored, interpreting David's story through a Jungian lens begins to seem quite intentional on Buckler's part. If the reader misses the clue of the mandala-shaped rug in the prologue, Buckler sows another hint in chapter 3: Ellen's mysterious sailor, kin to David either in spirit or in the

3 Ottawa artist Mary Forster was the first to suggest to me that the rug is shaped like a mandala and that the whole ending needs to be read in terms of self-transformation. Marta Dvorak, similarly, sees the "metaphysical resonances" in the "concentric circles of Ellen's rug" but focuses instead on the influence of Emerson's thought upon Buckler, citing a passage from Emerson's "Circles": "It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose center was everywhere and its circumference nowhere" (quoted in Dvorak 78).

4 Buckler was clearly interested in the world of the psyche and in the interpenetration of macro and micro spheres. In one interview he makes the claim that even though he lived in a very small town in the Annapolis Valley, "[t]he whole thing, the whole macrocosm, is here in microcosm. You don't have to know any more people than these to know what is going on in the human psyche" (quoted in Van Rys 68).

flesh, plucks a peacock's feather in a moment of transgression. Peacocks, according to Jung, are "an old emblem of rebirth and transformation" ("Mandala Symbolism" 375).

Watching one's behaviour, dreams, and reactions for clues about inner, psychical processes of growth, death, and rebirth is central to Jungian psychoanalysis. Not to be confused with some detached or transcendent philosophical "eye/I," the observer is immersed in his or her own life and identity while watching them unfold and questioning their possible meanings. Jung explains that

> since, with respect to the psyche, *we are both valley and mountain* … [t]he individual certainly does feel the affect and is convulsed and tormented by it, yet at the same time he is aware of a higher consciousness which prevents him from being identical with the affect, a consciousness which takes the affect objectively. ("Commentary" 88; emphasis added)

Development of this "higher consciousness" is symbolized in art and religious ritual as the "fateful transformations—death and rebirth—of a god or a god-like hero," which manifest as moments of "eternity in time" (Jung, "Rebirth" 117, 118). In the epilogue of *The Mountain and the Valley*, time "flattens" (281); David's experience of past and present blends together, and he is allowed access to god-like insights into himself and others. Translating David from one perception to another, this process culminates in his translation from flesh to text,[5] mirroring the linked processes of death and rebirth. David Canaan's movement through various stages of life and text, as well as various levels on his final climb up the mountain, thus can be seen as symbolizing an individual's process of psychic evolution, where "in the perplexity and anguish of his self-chosen prison … [he] is transformed into a being akin to the gods" (Jung, "Rebirth" 130).

Natural and inevitable, these "transformation processes announce themselves mainly in dreams" ("Rebirth" 130). David's story begins with a childhood dream of climbing the mountain. In it, as he walks along one path with father and brother, he becomes conscious of a parallel path upon which he walks alone (*MV* 15), just as his final journey up the mountain in the epilogue will exist on parallel planes, the literal and the symbolic. Juxtaposed to the description of David's dream is his brother's dream of almost, but not quite, consummating a sexual act (15). David's dream

5 Having a character blur the supposed boundaries of life versus text is an idea that intrigues Buckler, since in his second novel one character "even tells us how he will write the book we have just read" (Cook 1).

of failing to reach camp and Chris's dream of failing to attain his body's desire create yet another parallel; all work to emphasize the simultaneity and interpenetration of the physical and the psychical, of internal and external realities.

David's initial dream and his final ascent up the mountain also strangely parallel one of Jung's own dreams of climbing "slowly and toilsomely" up a mountain, which Jung describes in this way: "Night was coming on, and I saw … a brook flowing down … and two paths leading upwards, one to the left, the other to the right" ("Kore" 193). Jung goes on to relate how delighted he was to discover a sixteenth-century work on alchemy by Gerard Dorn which helps him to make sense of this dream. In it, Dorn explains a process whereby men may "bend their steps towards the *second region of the world*, making their crossing *on the bridge of infirmity*" where "you will come to the camp of wisdom" and see "a stream of living water flowing with such wonderful artifice from the mountain peak" (quoted in "Kore" 193–94; Jung's emphases). In his dream, David says to Chris, "I was walkin with you, and still I was walkin by myself on this other road that *didn't* have any trees on it. I saw the camp on this other road and went and told us on the log road, but when we come back to the other road the camp was gone … and we walked and walked, and I guess that's all, we didn't get to the camp" (*MV* 15). In their first actual attempt to climb the mountain together, David, Joseph, and Chris are turned away at a bridge by the news of two men having just been killed in a log drive. David's subsequent attempts to reach the absolute summit of the mountain also fail. By the final chapter, however, David's turn away from what Dorn characterized as "The Tour of the World" (quoted in "Kore" 193) is complete. His "infirmity," developed progressively over the course of the novel, has reached its inexorable conclusion. Finally, he crosses the bridge over water into which "a living movement" begins to come (*MV* 279).

He drinks at the brook, unaware that in it his reflection "wobbled and disintegrated"; he then continues past "the highest point of the brook that had held all their images at some time or other" (282). As he crosses this brook, David moves into a space that is free both of his own self-image and of his habitually myopic perception of others as mere reflections of his own desires. Beyond "defeat," "apathy," and "despair," and with a will that "remained unbroken," David begins his final journey up the mountain (275). As he climbs, moments and faces from his past arise out of the stillness of his mind. As he climbs upward he draws nearer to the state which in a mandala is symbolized by what Jung calls "an innermost point … surrounded by a periphery containing everything that belongs to the self—the

paired opposites that make up the total personality" ("Mandala Symbolism" 357). As David begins to absorb the significance of the paired opposites in his own life—Martha and Joseph, Anna and Chris, Effie and Toby—into his expanding sense of self, he also feels compelled to *be* whatever he sees now: "[I]t seems as if he must go out *into* these things. He must *be* a tree and a stone and a shadow.... He must be exactly as each of them was, everywhere and at all times" (*MV* 286). Martin Buber has described a state of awareness so profound that no sensation of division, no conventional subject/object dichotomy, mars the relationship between self and other: "[I]f will and grace are joined[,]... as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It.... But thinking that you have brought this off in your own case, must you again divide the indivisible?" (58–59). David thinks that he must, and the pressure to maintain each distinction, that "fanned at the touch of thought into another infinite divisibility," threatens to overwhelm him (*MV* 286).

As all of the voices, all of the faces, and all of these multitudinous perceptions explode in his mind, David reaches the top of the mountain, unaware at first that he has done so. From here he can see his place of origin—the "place of the middle" which figures in the Koran as being "between two Mountains" (Jung, "Rebirth" 139–44).[6] And then for David,

> without warning ... the translation came. All the voices were soaked up at once. Not in a vanishing, but as the piercing clamour of nerves in fever is soaked up in sleep. Sleep is the answer. At the moment of waking again their voices are still there, but the finding of the answer goes out over them, smoothening and softening and absorbent as firelight. There is no accusing in them now. They are like the challenging strangeness of a figure walking back-to along the road. As you come closer it turns and discloses the face of a friend. (*MV* 292)

David's "translation" from one state to another is echoed and underscored by the formal complexity of this passage. The present moment of his experience, conveyed in the past tense, is explicated and enlarged by what is apparently the past experience of the narrator conveyed in the present tense: voices and times blur, or are held in a sort of suspension, that they may overlay and mutually inform and communicate with each other.

Read in this way, neither David's habit of self-inflation nor his death need be seen as the failures that they often are. Jung would see David's

6 This "place of the middle" is occupied by people "who could barely understand a word" (Jung, "Rebirth" 139–44), a neat correspondence with the generally inarticulate nature of the inhabitants of Buckler's Entremont.

attempt to identify the "ego-consciousness with the [transpersonal] self" as a normal response, although a dangerous one, since the ego is "likely to collapse under the impact of the collective forces of the psyche" ("Rebirth" 145, 147). And "death," according to Jung, is a necessary phase in ongoing processes of rebirth, involving the translation of self from one state to another. Death allows for "the transformation of what is mortal in me into what is immortal…. It shakes off the mortal husk that I am and awakens to a life of its own" ("Rebirth" 134). The end or goal of self-transformation is shrouded in mystery: "It would be desirable to know what happens afterwards. But … nobody has ever been able to tell the story the whole way, at least not to mortal ears, for it is not the story-teller but death who speaks the final '*consummatum est*'" (Jung, "Study" 348). The entire process exceeds the grasp of the storyteller, which makes it appropriate that Buckler's novel ends in ambivalence and structurally sends the reader back in a loop to the beginning of the story.

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The limitations constraining the storyteller reflect the problems facing the mystic who wishes to communicate a transformative vision: "[T]he saying of the *Upanishads* is true: 'Words are weariness'"(Mascaró 11). Jung, whom Freud called "something of a mystic himself" (quoted in de Certeau 12), was fascinated by correspondences between his own psychoanalytical theories and the mysticism of the East. Although far from advocating an uncritical adoption of Eastern practices and beliefs, Jung devoted a great deal of effort to analyzing how this tradition and his own might enrich one another, writing as early as 1912 on the *Upanishads* and the *Rig Veda* (*Kundalini* xix). Buckler, too, was clearly familiar with Eastern philosophies.[7] Marta Dvorak notes that the "moments of epiphany" which occur in *Ox Bells and Fireflies* are compared explicitly "to the ecstasy that transcendentalists and theosophists borrowed from Eastern religions" (Dvorak 89). She quotes Buckler as describing these experiences as "a kind of instant Zen, come by with no effort at all. Perhaps in the most humdrum hour it would strike you right out of the blue, and … lift you higher than a June of kites into that sky of skies where *the glass between inside and outside melts completely away*" (quoted in Dvorak 89, emphasis hers).[8]

7 Buckler's reading was wide, eclectic, and intensive: Marta Dvorak recounts how "the librarian Diana Lockhart confided to Claude Bissell that his 'appetite for books was both prodigious and exotic'…. In 'My First Novel' Buckler explained how his contact with other writers, with literature and culture, consisted of the visits of the 'Godsent Bookmobile,' 'which brought me almost anything I wanted … in batches of twenty, sometimes'" (26).

8 In the prologue to *The Mountain and the Valley*, Buckler says that "Detail came clearly enough to David's sight; but it was as if another glass, beyond the glass

Epiphanies such as these, which Jung might see as being rooted in the transpersonal nature of all individuals, the *Upanishads* would explain in the following terms: "Brahman is all and Atman is Brahman" ("Mandukya Upanishad" 83). Atman, the soul or Self which is the spark of the eternal in each individual, "pervades everything, is one with everything" (Powell 98). It "has four conditions" ("Mandukya" 83) or "four states of consciousness culminating in knowledge of the Absolute" (Powell 98). In conjunction with the Jungian reading already explored, these four conditions or states can elucidate further the stages that David Canaan traverses on his final journey to the top of the mountain.

The first or lowest condition of Atman is "the waking life of outward-moving consciousness" ("Mandukya" 83). Existing within a seemingly "ordinary" world of perception, this level of consciousness relies upon (or creates) a stable division between subject and object and possesses only a rudimentary self-awareness. David encounters Steve on the road leading to the mountain; he realizes that for Steve there exists "an inside and an outside … but he would never look at the eye of his own watching.… A tree was a tree, a thing for the axe. A field was a field. You hauled across it when it was frozen, ploughed it when it was soft. That's all there was to it" (*MV* 277). Midway up the mountain, the narrator notes the dense scrub spruce yielding to hardwood, which "unlike the spruces, stood singly and separate.… The cold yellow sun and the thin cold air hung and breathed in the spaces between them, like a great centrifugal eddy of lightness" (*MV* 282). The second condition of Atman is "*taijasa*, 'the brilliant'" (Powell 98). This stage is "the dreaming life of inner-moving consciousness … in its own light and solitude" ("Mandukya" 83). Acutely aware of being entirely alone, David experiences the first of his shifts of consciousness (an experience with which the *narrator* is quite familiar): "It was the thing that comes only once or twice ever, without hint or warning. It was the complete transla-

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of the window pane, covered everything, made touch between any two things impossible" (8). In the epilogue, "Even the sensations of his own flesh had become outside. The inside was nothing but one great white naked eye of self-consciousness, with only its own looking to look at.… [I]nside and outside were not two things, but one" (275). This moment (read by so many critics as a collapse into utter solipsism) should remind readers of a similar experience related by Emerson in "Nature":

> Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (386)

tion to another time.... It is not a returning: you are there for the first time, immediately" (*MV* 283). He is *now* "waking that clean April morning" when he, his father, and Chris are about to attempt climbing the mountain together for the first time: the same morning that he dreams of climbing the mountain by an alternate, solitary path (283).

After this, as he continues to climb, a flood of perceptions inundates David with such intensity that he is unable to process them. Attempting to capture this infinity of phenomena "exactly," overwhelmed by the "swarming multitude" (285) of alternate possibilities "not traceable in space or boundable by time ... [David] screamed, 'Stop ... Stop ... Stop ... STOP ...' ... And then he raised his head and he saw that he was at the very top of the mountain" (291). And here, "without warning, suddenly again, the translation came": the clamouring voices are absorbed into silence just "as the piercing clamour of nerves in fever is soaked up in sleep. Sleep is the answer" (292). The third condition of Atman "is the sleeping life of silent consciousness[,]... all-powerful, all-knowing, the inner ruler, the source of all, the beginning and end of all beings" ("Mandukya" 83). According to Swami Sarvananda, in this state "cognition [is] reduced to a mere indefinite mass, full of bliss ... and forming the gateway to all definite cognitions" (quoted in Powell 98). David himself recognizes that this "sleep" is no final plateau but preliminary to further possibilities: "[A]ll the voices came close about him. They weren't swarming now. He went out into them until there was no inside left. He saw at last how you could *become* the thing you told" (*MV* 292). Not only David's characteristic grandiosity, then, is implied in his thought that "I know how it is with everything" (*MV* 292): the final condition of Atman is Atman itself, beyond words, beyond dualities. As Barbara Powell explains (again quoting Sarvananda),

> the fourth level, *turiya* ... [is] qualitatively and categorically different from the other states, yet at the same time present in all the states. It is, in reality, not a fourth part of anything, but the whole of reality. It is the Self ... "unseen, unrelated, inconceivable, uninferable, unimaginable, indescribable .... All phenomena cease in it. It is peace, it is bliss, it is non-duality. This is the Self, and it is to be realized." (98)

That David's "death," the ultimate translation, occurs at this point is symbolically apt if the novel has followed his development as far as language can.

According to John Van Rys, on "the mountain-top, David ... seeks to master a nonexistent meta-language that will soak up all voice in a mono-

logic vision. David seeks to become the *Logos*, the creator and Messiah who unlike Christ grasps at godhood" (77). Attending to Buckler's emphatic focus on translation in the epilogue may be a key antidote to this negative framing of David's experience. Translation, according to Walter Benjamin, is an activity, a habit of mind, that "seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages…. Though concealed and fragmentary, it is an active force in life as the symbolized thing itself, whereas it inhabits linguistic creations only in symbolized form" ("The Task of the Translator" 79). Hannah Arendt's interpretation of Benjamin's interest in translation might explain Buckler's as well:

> What fascinated him … was that the spirit and its material manifestation were so intimately connected that it seemed permissible to discover everywhere Baudelaire's *correspondences*, which clarified and illumined one another if they were properly correlated, so that finally they would no longer require any interpretative or explanatory commentary. (11)

Translation, according to Walter Benjamin, is an activity, a habit of mind.

Buckler's frequent and precise use of simile and metaphor, which create surprisingly vivid, synaesthetic flashes of perception through the translation of one thing to another, echoes Benjamin's fascination with correspondences. In the "Author's Questionnaire" for *Ox Bells and Fireflies*, Buckler defends his great care in creating these webs of interrelationship, explaining that he "intended to underline … the inter-locking and cross-pollination of all things tangible or intangible" (quoted in Dvorak 200). David likewise realizes on the top of the mountain that "He could think of anything now. Everything seemed to be an aspect of something else. There seemed to be a thread of similarity running through the whole world" (*MV* 281).

Marta Dvorak proposes that

> [a] close examination of Buckler's recurrent rhetorical devices reveals that the dynamics of his writing involve creating simultaneously, in a paradoxical fashion, a web of ramifications that generate a cross-network of analogies and a corresponding movement from the Many to the One…. The metaphor, in particular, plays a central role in Buckler's textual production, as an agent of marvellous transformation, allowing the reader to see one thing under the aspect of another, or to see together, in the same category, what the ordinary gaze does not or cannot associate. Buckler's metaphors do not describe the world—they create a new vision of the world. (10–11)

Buckler's entire body of work, Dvorak says, exhibits a "commitment to transmit a vision of ultimate divine truth, to transport the reader to a dimension beyond prosaic reality through revelation of the good.… For Buckler, the artist's power … is a moral power" (10). In her reading of *The Mountain and the Valley*, however, Dvorak sees that power as being unrealized in David, as she focuses on the "structural irony that posits that David is a failed artist" (108).[9] While that reading works on one level, the structure of the novel also has been designed, as we have already seen, to open up multiple readings of David's "ending." And, in fact, Buckler's "recurrent rhetorical devices"—in particular, repetition, juxtaposition, and parenthesis—all work, in combination with the novel's subtly flexible narrative voice,[10] to create an insistent paradigm within which David's final experience is no failure at all. Instead, that experience is but one of many moments of communion experienced by people in the novel which grow from and respond to mystery while being unable, ultimately, to contain it. One section of the novel will suffice as an example: "Part One—The Play."

After Anna goes with her grandmother to look at a captured fawn (and she realizes with a sick feeling the unbridgeable gap between the world of her experience and that of the wild animal), the narrative shifts to a description of the new church site, a result of communal effort:

> Everyone in the place (Baptists and Catholics too) had driven a nail or laid a board or helped raise a rafter. Spurge Gorman had hewn the cross from the great mountain ash he'd looked out for axe handles; and Peter Delahunt had fixed the cross to the steeple. The bishop from Halifax had consecrated the new burial ground only last week. (*MV* 24)

Here the narrator inserts a two-paragraph parenthetical description of Martha's fear that the bishop might stay to dinner. Besides exhibiting the narrator's flexibility in inhabiting and communicating multiple points of view, this parenthetical comment also plays with and disrupts the narrative line, allowing bubbles of momentary insight to form laterally and be expressed. Within that parenthesis—detailing Martha's fear of the unfa-

9 Dvorak goes on to say that "In *The Mountain and the Valley*, the epilogue makes the irony explicit by telescoping with a daring use of the conditional tense David's series of delusions into one final, false—because retrospective—vision in which he looks ahead / back to grand achievements that will forever (never) happen(ed)" (140).

10 So subtle is the impact of the undercurrents created by this voice and its embedded structural devices that it provides yet another example of the importance of multiple re-readings of this novel.

miliar other—the bishop turns out to be "only a man" as Joseph asserted he would (24). The narrator notes as well, in a characteristic shifting of pronouns, that "[h]e was a smiling man who made you feel like smiling too" (24). This "you" is from Martha's perspective, as filtered through the narrator, but it is used, as the second-person pronoun functions throughout this novel, to signal "a powerful universality" (Dvorak 175): "you" is a plurality meaning "we," all of us, individually and collectively. It means that "I" experienced this, but know that we all would. "You" is "us" in this novel, as well as other. Its usage rests on the supposition of the communicability of experience, of at least a partial commonality.

The narrative then shifts to the opposite of communicable experience, to mystery. Viewing the new church site, Ellen thinks that for her "mystery still dwelt in the old church four miles down the road.... It too was a building made by human hands like any other building ... but she felt that the mystery breathed there all by itself whether there was the sound of voices on the road or not" (24). Mystery appears again a little further on, with the deaths of two men of the community. It touches the houses of Spurge and Peter, an "illegible secret" that people could not read but could sense. The "enigmatic windows" reflect the beams from the sinking sun (36), and mourners try to understand the "enigmatic face" of the dead man (37). At the funeral services, everyone

> held up their faces meekly to the rain of solemn words. They heard only the sound, not the heart of them. It wasn't until the organ began, the one sound which chords with the watcher's feeling at the enigmatic language of death, that everyone wept. (38)

Then, collectively, they are translated from this encounter with mystery back to their ordinary lives once again: "Swiftly as a breeze, Peter and Spurge passed from fact to memory.... Now the grass was ordinary grass only. The fields became familiar weekday fields again" (38). That this translation occurs, however, underscores the fact that the reverse has taken place as well. "Ordinary" things, faces, and words have been transformed by mystery and perceived differently, although it has not been possible to express or understand their meaning directly or completely. After the conclusion of this section, the novel proceeds to chart the myriad paths of communication and relationship frustrated, aborted, or wilfully denied. Yet an emphasis has first been established, subtly, on collective experiences that cannot be spoken or interpreted fully but whose reality is felt nonetheless.

This is a text that unquestionably highlights issues of dominance and control via the use of language.

Much of what the narrator describes with such loving, agonizing precision centres on silence: still moments of evanescent beauty that can only be approached in language through simile or metaphor, the yoking together of two ineffables which grasps at meaning through the translation of one thing into another. Most of the power struggles between Buckler's characters focus on their decision to speak or to remain silent. Language in this narrative distorts reality, and falls short of expressing it, but functions as a necessary bridge between human beings nonetheless. Silence, language's counterpart in this novel, can wound but can also heal. When David experiences perfect peace on the mountain, he has to speak it aloud: "With the use of his tongue, the sound of it suddenly in the stillness broke the grip on his thinking as the first halting words of forgiveness do" (286). The healing silence that stills the assaulting voices makes David think that he should "*tell* it…. That is the answer" (298).

Gershom Scholem points out that writers of mystical texts "continuously and bitterly complain of the utter inadequacy of words to express their true feelings, but, for all that, they glory in them … and never weary of trying to express the inexpressible" (15). For the mystic, language is a bridge emerging from and extending toward what Emerson terms "the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related" ("Oversoul" 134). David Canaan is translated into silence and into whiteness at the end of the novel, the silence that contains every voice and the colour that is "made of all the other colours but of no colour itself at all" (*MV* 294). At the same moment, Ellen sees that, in her rug, only "one tiny circle remained. White. White … She picked up the scrap of fine white lace and made of it the last circle" (295). As he contemplates translating silence into words, David is translated, from being to book (implicitly), from life to death, from identity to mystery.

This is a text that unquestionably highlights issues of dominance and control via the use of language: the framing of the story, the prose style, and the various characters' wounding use of speech as well as, conversely, their refusal to speak, can all easily be construed as "phallocentric" as Janice Kulyk Keefer insists (165). Buckler, the narrator, and David, as well as many of the other characters in this novel, betray a desire to be the controlling, perceiving subject, particularly through the agency of language. Margery Fee sees a coincidence between David and Buckler as word-wranglers: David, "like Buckler, longs to transcend his awkward relation to language, not by abandoning words, but by making his artificial use of them seem natural, rather than worked over. That *Buckler's* style seems often to fall short of both his own and David's standards has troubled many critics"

(71). Fee quotes Warren Tallman to reinforce this idea: "Buckler has no compositional key except maximum intensity. Sentence after sentence is forced to a descriptive pitch which makes the novel exceptionally wearing to read" (71). This may be true, but the novel also emphasizes communication amongst multiple perspectives in a way that substantially dilutes these charges against its apparently controlling discourse. Likewise, even while the narrative pushes toward a prefigured end, it in fact hosts an interplay of opposing energies, making it not only open to incursions and communications from other levels of meaning but also an extraordinarily self-conscious study of the paradoxical function of storytelling itself.

David's own habit of storytelling grows at least partly from a fierce desire to hold himself separate from and untouched by contingency and the uncontrollable other. The stories he tells himself about his superior abilities elevate him to a lonely pinnacle, while the people around him figure only as his audience, "enthralled" by his masterful abilities. He is not alone in this tendency, however. Stories in this novel often operate as modes of control rather than as modes of communication. Coming back from the log drive in which two of their number have died, for instance, each man "was telling over and over whatever part of it he himself had seen" (*MV* 34). I-centred, this kind of storytelling processes traumatic events and asserts the self's mastery over chance and disaster, while relying on the other as witness: "They repeated over and over again the things they'd said to each other along the road, asking each other over and over again for sanction" (34). David walks with them, trying to understand the way adults deal with tragedy:

> The men were mostly silent. But now and then they spoke about their work, the season, even a smirking joke that had to do with women. This had no relation to the shock that was basic in all their minds, but David didn't understand that. He didn't know that adult speech was merely an instrument of disguise. Their remarks seemed heartless to him. He didn't see how they could talk at all. He hadn't said a word, even to Chris. (35)

The choice to speak or not to speak becomes charged with an intensity here that will plague David for the rest of his life.

Likewise, the first of David's own self-amplifying stories occurs while he is walking with the men. Just as he is shrinking at the thought of how Effie will suffer when she hears of her father's death, someone mentions that Pete had survived long years of war only to die now in a freak accident: "That's the way she goes" is Joseph's laconic comment. And suddenly,

"David wasn't with them at all" (35). For the first time in this narrative, David escapes into a grandiose fantasy: "[S]uddenly, like waking from a muddled dream, he knew exactly what he was going to be. He was going to be the greatest general in the whole world" (35). In contrast to a painfully "muddled" reality, David imagines rescuing soldiers trapped under fire, his empathy *for* others provoking an escape *from* them into a world of his own making. And although the stories David tells himself feature extremes of self-dramatization, they also usually involve sharing his gifts, enabling others through his art to know that their inner reality has been understood and communicated.

On the mountain, David's self-focus, pushed to another extreme, becomes converted spontaneously into an overwhelming awareness of and responsiveness to an abundance of energies and possibilities that he cannot begin to encompass, although he attempts to be in control of these as well. Doomed to fall short, this attempt is also a part of that movement toward communion and communication to which the narrator has been concerned to draw readers' attention, those momentary encounters with what is other than the self, with what both is and is not "you." In the end, at the moment of his novel's most overt display of authorial management, Buckler yields control to the reader, who must make sense of the epilogue's shifting levels of perspective and its layering of metaphor and irony. He infuses this final chapter with the language of mysticism and the archetypal imagery of psychic transformation, even as he follows David's characteristic flaws to their logical conclusion. Perhaps the mixture of all of these elements accounts for the "greyness" into which the ending descends (295–96). David's death can be read simultaneously as tragic, as the ironic anticlimax of a life of posturing and thwarted potential, and as a translation of his experience beyond the limitations of personality, language, and text. However, I would say that the weight falls on this last possibility: while the novel ends with the grey partridge falling from the "grey-laden air … as if burdened with the weight of its own flight," it falls "swoopingly, directly, intensely, exactly" on the *far* side of the mountain (296).[11]

A Hindu mystic might claim that consciousness does not die, that David's physical death is immaterial in the sense that an observing, experiencing awareness will continue on, incorporating lessons learned and bringing them to fruition in another incarnation; Jung would probably say

11 In "On the Four Degrees of Passionate Charity," Richard of St Victor writes the following which both parallels somewhat the four stages of consciousness described in *The Upanishads* and provides yet another image for David's journey

that David's death is symbolic of the many deaths each of us will undergo on our own journeys toward the selves we already are in potential. Readers do not have to entertain beliefs such as these to benefit from the double vision proffered by *The Mountain and the Valley*. As Paul Ricoeur says in *Oneself As Another*, the reader who is "interpreting the text of an action is interpreting himself or herself" (179): that "self" is a mystery, but it is one which actively engages narrative as a mode of self/other awareness, in an oscillating movement between appropriation and distanciation (167–68; 183). According to Marta Dvorak,

> Buckler argues that our gaze must be coupled with another gaze, a complementary one: ourselves seen from the outside, as another would see us, in the process of contemplating him or her. Buckler's writing is thus … an epistemological attempt to arrive at an understanding of the nature … of the human mind, of the cosmos, and of knowledge itself. (99)

The eye/I of the reader has accompanied David on his final ascent up the mountain and then made the return to the beginning to make sense of this "ending," in search of the inner eye/I of the narrator, the hidden consciousness that shapes this story. In telling the story of David and in reading that story, the you that means all of us in Buckler's usage is momentarily illumined. I, you, we incorporate the story of David's ending on the mountain and take it back down with us, into the valley.

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up the mountain and his subsequent "fall," embodied in the falling bird which is "burdened with the weight of its own flight" (*MV* 296) :

> In the first degree God enters into the soul and she turns inward into herself. In the second she ascends above herself and is lifted up to God. In the third the soul, lifted up to God, passes over altogether into Him. *In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself.* (quoted in *Mysticism: A Study* 100–01)

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