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**How Words Hook Onto the World:
A Literary Ethnography
of Andrew Suknaski's Wood Mountain**

by
Dawn Morgan, B.A.

A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
September 29, 1993

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***How Words Hook Onto the World:
A Literary Ethnography
of Andrew Suknaski's Wood Mountain***

submitted by Dawn Morgan, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

R.B. Rutland, Thesis Supervisor

Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
September 29, 1993

Abstract

This thesis examines the poetry of Andrew Suknaski on the basis of a selection of his "Wood Mountain texts." Through the application of categories derived from M.M. Bakhtin, it explores the text/world relationship as it is made visible in Suknaski's work. Suknaski solves the problem of his positioning in relation to his literary material by the dialogic process Bakhtin calls novelization. Other salient Bakhtinian categories therefore include a particular use of the term "utterance"; a notion of human subjectivity as arising from conditions of transgression, social heteroglossia and answerability; the chronotope; and the carnivalesque figure of the fool. In this critical process, I position myself as ethnographer, as I was born into the same geographical part of the world as Suknaski, near Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan. By means of transgression, or an "excess of seeing" Suknaski's texts and his world, I find that Suknaski's Wood Mountain texts constitute an "answering" to the colonial expansion of Europe. This expansion enabled Suknaski's parents to come to the New World. It led to Suknaski's positioning in the marginal world of Wood Mountain, where he must answer to both the subsequently displaced aboriginal peoples, which marks him as "white man," and to his eastern European origins, which marks him as "ethnic." Suknaski is denied full citizenship or means of identity in either place, which leads him to adopt the stance of the "Holy Fool," and to *Wood Mountainize* the world, in order to position himself and all displaced peoples in productive relations of reciprocal identity.

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My primary debt is to my advisor, Professor Barry Rutland. To use his own modest superlative, he has been a most *useful* dialogizing other in the process of researching and writing this paper. Thanks also to Professors Barbara Leckie, Jack Healy and Brenda Carr for their interest in Suknaski and in this project.

Contents

Acceptance Form *ii*

Abstract *iii*

Acknowledgements *iv*

Table of Contents *v*

The Pretext *1*

Chapter One Marking the Boundaries with Bakhtin *6*

Chapter Two The Novelization of Suknaski's Poetry... *22*

Chapter Three ...and the Wood Mountainization of the World *35*

Chapter Four The Special Use of Language *47*

Chapter Five The Ground of Representability *64*

Chapter Six The Masks of the Holy Fool *88*

Notes *108*

Bibliography *110*

The Pretext

Literary studies and ethnography converge on the crucial issue of textuality. Ethnographers have now discovered, or "admitted," that what they do is "a kind of writing" (Geertz 1). In retrospect, this self-conscious awareness exists in the earliest participant-observer ethnographies by Malinowski (82-3). But it is only recently that ethnographers have begun to theorize it and consider its implications for what they do. The authority of ethnographic accounts historically has derived from their ability to persuade the reader (by rhetorical means) that the author was really out there in the world somewhere, and further, that, had the reader been there, he or she would have witnessed or experienced the same thing. The promise of the replicability of results has been the test of the scientific nature of ethnography. But recognition of the particular situatedness of the ethnographer, and of the rhetorical basis of ethnographic authority (the impossibility of replicating "findings" situated in specific places and times; the imperative to "persuade") has led anthropologists to relinquish claims of being strictly "scientific," in favour of careful declarations and productive explorations of "positioning" in relation to selected cultures, or texts. It has also led to an awareness that cultural description functions as cultural critique, not of, or not *only* of, the culture apparently under the ethnographer's gaze, but of the presuppositions and the descriptive and analytical categories of ethnographers themselves. This in turn has led ethnographers to inquire how it is, exactly, that words "hook" onto the world, and therefore what is the status of ethnography in relation to the "real" or the empirical

world it attempts to describe¹

Ethnography has come to this "self-reflexive" reckoning-- either dooming it or making an honest practice of it, depending upon your theoretical orientation--partly as a result of the same developments in such fields as linguistics that have shaken literary studies to their foundations. However, as ethnography retreats from its claims to be scientific in response to these developments, literary studies has been attempting to become more "scientific," or at least more accountable for what it does and for its place in the human sciences. Beginning with the Russian Formalists' desire to isolate and identify *literaturnost*, and through the pervasive influence of Saussurean linguistics, current literary study is increasingly preoccupied with theorizing its own practice, with exposing, critiquing and relativizing the transcendent¹ underpinnings of literary studies historically, and with finding the more earthly, materialist bases and processes of human cognition, communication, and social relations. The concern with accounting for literature, and with rooting literary studies in the material world, in discourses and in bodies, in space and time, rather than in transcendental essences, brings literature to the same question as that which confronts ethnography: how do literary texts "hook onto" the world, and what is their status in relation to the world? In literary studies, this question is partly spillage from the "crisis" in the conception and writing of history (Gearhart 56), which is itself a result of the recent challenges of linguistics, philosophy, and the "exact" sciences to the entire ground of knowledge.

The "problem" of history, or within the discipline of history, is also a grappling with the recognition of history as text, the inescapable condition of textuality. Like

the ethnographer, the historian is re-named the "historiographer," stressing the role as writer, as composer of historical texts (Wortman 281). As Hayden White puts it, the question facing historians today is not "What are the facts?" but "How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?" (44). And beyond this contest of discourses in the practice of history, post-structuralism asserts that "history cannot provide an unquestionable ground once the working of difference is appreciated" (Bennington 5). I do not here attempt to take on the question of history explicitly, or to evaluate the status of history as a discipline in a post-structuralist world. Increasingly, however, literary theorists are challenged to not only "historicize" their work, but to then "situate historically" their own account of history (Morson, *Introduction* 1). Traditionally, there have been various ways in which literary studies have tried to use or to relate to history. Critics have examined events and developments "outside" the literary text, the historical context or conjuncture in which the work appears, for what it might add to an explanation of the constitution of the text or of events themselves. They have looked at the text and/or the biographies of particular writers in relation to literary historical trends, such as modernism, or in relation to literary genres, such as lyric poetry, and tried to "place" them within "the tradition." They have explicated the writer's representation of history and, more recently, they have studied how the same texts are read by different readers at various times in history. Even if history were not the dynamic variable of textuality we now understand it to be, these approaches have been inadequate. They have even had a curiously de-historicizing effect, according to Richard Wortman, a scholar of

Slavic history, who notes that writers and their texts still "stand apart, neither integrated in their society, nor dominated by their epoch" (292). What he refers to is the way in which literary studies tries to place texts in history without being able to talk about how they are constitutive of and constituted by history at the level of aesthetics, which is apparently the level at which they differ from other kinds of texts and hence have their own discipline at all. Literary texts somehow remain inexplicable, untouched by and isolated from historical context. In the words of Volosinov/Bakhtin, literary investigations remain "divorced from the problem of language on one hand, and from the problem of social intercourse on the other" (*Marxism* 97).²

Questions of history have also impinged on ethnography in the "sudden" historical visibility of the "postcolonial subject." This is the "subject" who has historically been the object of ethnography, a practice largely formed in the "Colonial Encounter," which claimed not only to describe but to speak for and therefore dominate its material or the "objects" of its study (Geertz 134). Ethnographers are now in the "absurd" position of having their subjects talk back. The prefix "post-" of the postcolonial subject signifies that this is a subject constituted by conditions which no longer prevail, or which are passing into history. There must be developments in the world and in texts which account for this emergence--developments traditionally the responsibility and in the domain of history. But is this a question of history, or of texts? And what is the relation between the two? In literature, the postcolonial subject is he or she who is made visible by new historicist or deconstructive or

feminist means. Postcolonial subjects are those who now fight, or are called upon, to speak for themselves and to produce their own texts. In literature, as in ethnography and history, "positioning" is the condition of critical practice, where we are all "postcolonial" subjects, positioned always in relation to those whose ability to say "I" has been, or still is, inaudible or suppressed.

Just as I do not intend explicitly to wrestle with the question of history, so I do not pretend to be able to resolve the problems and questions of ethnography. In discussing these issues, I want instead to situate (or "position") my discussion of the work of Andrew Suknaski, a poet who does confront these questions by way of his own "literary" material. Suknaski's material includes cultural description of real people and places in historical time (ethnography), from the necessarily situated perspective of his own (historical, textual) life. These materials constitute what I will come to call, after Bakhtin, the conditions of his "answerability." They are the materials out of which he constructs a "self" who answers to the world by means of his "Wood Mountain texts."³

Chapter One

Marking the Boundaries with Bakhtin

The analytical categories and tools provided by M.M. Bakhtin are particularly useful for a reading of the texts and the world of Andrew Suknaski. Bakhtin called himself a "philosophical anthropologist," and he was able to put forward a viable "historical poetics" precisely because he does not posit "text" and "world" in oppositional terms. Instead, he sees them as relational conditions, differing in degree rather than in essence (Holquist, *Bakhtin* 207). As a result of this conceptualisation, Bakhtin produced both a theory of language and a theory of culture. His theory begins with the basic unit of discourse, the utterance, and goes on to treat of human subjectivity (the speaking subject), through a theory of genres, of how spheres of language use arise from and are tied to historical time and geological and social space, to a theory of aesthetics and ethics. It seems to me that if we are serious about our practices of "positioning" within the conditions of textuality, then nothing less than this scope of theoretical grounding is required. At the very least, I will show that Bakhtin's historical poetics is a most suggestive and productive approach to the texts of Andrew Suknaski.

Bakhtin's point of departure for thinking about language is the utterance. The

defining boundaries of any utterance are social markers, as an utterance is necessarily made in response to a previous utterance, and anticipates an utterance in reply (Volosinov, *Marxism* 72). In opposition to theories of utterance as the outward objectification of "that inner something which is expressible," Bakhtin--in perhaps the earliest formulation of the inescapable condition of textuality--maintains that there is no such thing as an experiential, expressible element "outside of [its] embodiment in signs" (84-5). The "inner something" and its "outward objectification" are made of "one and the same material.... It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around--*expression organizes experience*" (85). But what is this expressive material which does not permit of a dualism between inner and outer? Again in opposition to prevailing theories of language, Bakhtin did not permit of a dualism between *langue*, a system of linguistic norms, and *parole*, language as it is used in specific utterances, and so did not permit of the privileging of one over the other. Instead, Bakhtin envisioned language as a "contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies" (*Novel* 272). A unified language system is a centripetal force, always in dynamic tension with the centrifugal forces of social heteroglossia:

A unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited--and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. But at the same time it makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming this heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystalizing [sic] into a real, although still relative, unity--the unity of the reigning conversational (everyday) and literary language, "correct language." (270)

This "correct language" struggles against its own internal stratification, which is social heteroglossia operationalized in specific utterances, including

social dialects, characteristic group behaviours, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphasis).... (262-3)

As a result of these "stratifying forces in language, there are no neutral words and forms" (293). All words are "shot through" with their uses by others in previous utterances, in previous times and places. With every word, the speaker takes an evaluative stance in relation to these previous utterances, to the way in which these words have been used in the past, and conditions the way they may be used in the future. The speaker weighs or evaluates every word but is never the originator of the word.

Lest it seem as though the language itself is speaking (which, in a way, it is), it is important to note that Bakhtin conceives of the speaking subject, the self, not as an "essence" but as a *function* of the (necessarily social) dialogic exchange. Dialogism operationalizes and constitutes identities just as it operationalizes languages. In this conception of the self, Bakhtin disallows the most famous and fundamental of binary oppositions, that of self/other, as it is only by means of the other that the self becomes visible, or available, to itself. "Self and other are the two poles of all perceptual [i.e. meaning-generating] possibilities" (Holquist, *Bakhtin* 74). Holquist uses the analogy

of the three fates of Greek mythology, who pass around the same "eye" in order to see, to illustrate Bakhtin's dialogic conception of self and other:

In order to have her own vision, each must use the means by which the others see. In dialogism this sharedness is indeed the nature of fate for us all. For in order to see our selves, we must appropriate the vision of others. (*Dialogism* 28)

The self has no referent in itself. It refers to nothing in the external world, but only to "I" in relation to someone or something in the outside world. The constituent elements of selfhood then are a centre (*self*), a not-centre (*other*), and the relation between the two (29). The self only "gets" or constructs itself from the other in the sense that only the other's categories or vision will enable it to be an object of its own perception. The self can only be forged from the *outside* (28-9). The self's intuitive sense of its own uniqueness arises from the necessarily unique positioning of the self in space and time--positioning that is unique by virtue of the fact that when the self is there, no *other* can be. This is the ground of "positioning" and of "difference" in Bakhtin's philosophic anthropology. This is also the ground of the generation of *value*. Bakhtin does not stop at the inescapable *difference* at the core of human existence. He goes on to trace the working of difference, to find out what it is productive or generative of. By extension, he points to how *difference* does not work, or how it may work against *social* existence, how it is not mediated, or how it is mediated or negotiated in negative, non-productive, or anti-social ways.

Bakhtin models his theory of self/other relations on author/hero relations in

literary (aesthetic) presentations. Because the author/hero exchange takes place in a border zone between art and life, text and world, and because the conditions of textuality obtain on both sides of this border, Bakhtin's analogy is valid for modelling both self/other and author/hero relations. That is, I am not necessarily extrapolating when I present his analysis in terms of self/other. Rather, we are talking about the same thing. The only difference, of course, is in the value that might be assigned to manifestations of this working of difference on either side of the border.

In Bakhtin's model, when "I" look at "the other," from my unique position in existence, I perceive things that the other cannot perceive, such as the wall behind and the expression on the other's face. Likewise, regardless of how "closely" we may be placed, the other can see things about me that I cannot. We each have an *excess of seeing* in perceiving each other. But my *excess* is the other's *lack*, and conversely, what my perception of myself lacks constitutes the other's excess of perception of me. "As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes" (*Art* 23).

In my vision, I see the other as completed, whole, and in this vision I can be said to *consummate* the other. This is in contrast to my experience of myself, in which I can never be completed. To myself, I am always in a state of becoming. But the act of completing the other is the act of giving form, and to give form is to assign value, as that form can only be represented in relation to the context the other is in, based on my excess of seeing.

Depending upon the degree of *transgression* I achieve in this perceptual

relationship, the form and value I assign to the other will be that of an object perceived, or that of a subject who is perceived and who is also *able to perceive*.

Transgredience, variously translated as *outsideness* and *extralocality*, is a word Bakhtin borrowed from German aesthetic theory. It is derived from the Latin *transgredi*, *transgressus*, to step across or to step over. In Bakhtin, it means the degree to which I am able to step "over" the threshold of my self, or the threshold of the other, to be able to perceive not only my self but the world, through the eyes of the other. In a sense, "I" become "the other," but only temporarily. In representing or in giving form to this exchange, the other is necessarily shaped, and, as Bakhtin says, *intoned* with value, as a *whole*, as a *subject*, rather than as an object of my perception.

Transgredience is my consummation of the other and of my self by means of the other. It may be thought of as transcendence, except that the movement is horizontal rather than vertical. And in transgredience, the only "essence" is the essential relation negotiated between the two horizontally positioned poles.

But if transgredience is the key to the openness of dialogic exchange, how is it "achieved"? Where does it come from? To ensure a total evacuation of transcendental categories, it is necessary to stress that transgredience is both the *condition* and the *product* of constructing an identity (that is, of assigning meaning and value) for my self, and therefore for the other who enables that construction. This is the source of transgredience. The constituents of transgredience are the excess of seeing, knowing, and valuation (Bakhtin, *Art* 204). The production of transgredience, and the resultant creation of the conditions for meaning construction, in turn constitute

work. "'Self,' in the sense of *alter* is a project requiring work' (Holquist, *Introduction* xliv). The implication is that, rather than finding value *a priori*, value is produced in social interaction. It arises from processes, and it is in a very real sense the medium of exchange in the construction of identity.

The most dialogic utterance, in which this ideal transgredient relation is realized, is the most engaging of the other, the addressee, and the most open to possibilities and variations of identity construction in both the speaking self and other. In short, the dialogic utterance is highly transgredient. The monologic utterance would be that which has the effect of closing off or blocking the possibilities for the realization of identity in the speaker and the interlocutor. The speaking subject would not or could not step over the threshold of self or other in order to see the world or a self through the eyes of the other. But, predictably by now, it is not really a matter of a duality, of dialogism versus monologism. Rather, real dialogue, or dialogic discourse, can only proceed *by means of* the monologic utterance. In the dialogic exchange, the speaking self *must* close off, complete, or consummate the other (with varying degrees of transgredience, that is, allowing for varying degrees of subjective status in the other). If this consummation is effected with a sufficient degree of transgredience, the other is free to respond in a correspondingly open and generous manner. The resulting exchange will be dialogic, allowing maximum possibilities for the realization of identity, and for variations of identity. Identity is not fixed forever but only within specific dialogic exchanges, situated in time and space.

One of the ways that Bakhtin demonstrates his practice of historical poetics is

the way in which he traces the entry into and the impact of folk cultural forms on "belles lettres" (*Rabelais* 54). He traces this impact through what we now understand as the very social and form-giving material of language. His understanding of the categories of self and other as only operationalized or made available by way of utterances led him to characterize the image of the fool or "playing the fool" as *a special form of the utterance*. The fool is to be found "on the periphery of the artistic" and is determined "by an extremely complex and tangled conflict of the speaker with the listener" (Volosinov, *Discourse* 113). The fool is connected to those moments in texts when "the hero can no longer coincide with himself: he begins to see his own nakedness and to be ashamed and paradise is lost" (*Art* 172). Fools are "life's maskers" (*Chronotope* 159), and "in the struggle against conventions, and against the inadequacy of all available life-slots to fit an authentic human being, these masks take on an extraordinary significance" (163).

In Bakhtin, the image and character of the fool is a form of *radical alterity*:

Essential to these...figures is...the right to be "other" in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation. (159)

In other words, the fool sees the *constructed nature* of every situation. One of the most ancient functions of the fool is to make public the "private spheres" of life, to remind us, as we have seen, that we are in fact socially-constructed beings, and that all which has been banished to the non-public sphere (for example, sexual and other

"vital" bodily functions) has been banished by *convention* rather than by "nature." To carry out this making public of private spheres, the fool is granted

the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life, the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not 'to be oneself'...the right to act life as a comedy, and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others...and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets (163).

The fool exposes the other side of "wisdom," the other side of "truth," "the lower stratum of official laws and conventions" (*Rabelais* 260). The fool, who has no "being" of his or her own, is the incarnation of this hidden, other side of things, "the side that ...nobody talked about, that did not fit the words and forms of prevailing philosophy" (271).

This function and role of "making-public...specifically non-public spheres" is the restoration of "literature's sundered tie with the public square" (*Chronotope* 161, 165). According to Bakhtin, this tie was restored because the function of "making-public" private spheres is precisely what early writers of novels required. At the time of the novel's emergence, authors needed to find "a *position* permitting a look at the *other side* of established values, so that new bearings could be taken" (*Rabelais* 272). In other genres, such as drama and lyrical poetry, the perspective required to give shape to the material was built in to the genre itself (*Chronotope* 161). But Bakhtin isolates this as a *generic* problem of the novel, and finds that novelists adopted the image and stance of the fool to resolve it. Specifically, the problem was the self-

contradictory one of presenting the "presence of a witness to intimacy" (Morson, *Prosaics* 401). More generally in Bakhtin's philosophy, the question is how to understand or gain access to subjective experience. By taking the stance of the fool, and/or by presenting the hero as fool, the right "not to understand" is granted. And the fool's inability to understand has the effect of calling conventions, especially conventions of identity, into question. Once identities are relativized, once masks are ripped off and "postures" relaxed, we may begin to speak about the necessarily social nature of "subjective experience" as a give-and-take among selves and others. This is the ambivalent and unsettling nature of the image of the fool.

In this discussion, I will show how Andrew Suknaski's work is fully "novelized," and therefore how Suknaski is confronted with the problem of novelized genres, of how to make public the private sphere. In the tradition Bakhtin has made visible and available to us, we will see how Suknaski too adopts the image and stance of the fool. In the case of Suknaski, however, the image of the fool--and specifically the "holy fool"--was available to him directly from Slavic folk sources, both pre-Christian and in the traditions of the Eastern Church. In Suknaski, we find a particularly strong form of this image, which positions the poet as *radically other* to his community of Wood Mountain. He brings its secrets--the suicides of homesteaders, the near genocide of aboriginal peoples, their heroic and bitter survival, the dreams of lost homelands, the lonely drunks on the benches at the back of the community hall, the reveries of storytellers in the pub, the losses of war vets--onto the public square of his "Wood Mountain texts." The fool's stance allows Suknaski to

"work" the borders of self/other, inner/outer, text/world, to make common cause with none, to reveal, to construct, to "utter" an *other* history, and an *other* identity.

Suknaski's fool "fails" to comprehend history as given because it is not his history.

He "fails" to coincide with his given identity because it is really a non-identity, in the absence of an enabling other to co-construct a self, or to open up a category of identity that might accommodate him.

The publicizing function points to the particular chronotope which the fool carries into literature. The image of the fool has "a vital connection with the theatrical trappings of the public square" and specifically, "with that part of the square where the common people congregate" (*Chronotope* 159). The fool is aligned with the "common people" because he is "other" to the king or to God, or to whatever reigning authority exists. The "chronotope" is a term Bakhtin borrowed from Einstein's Theory of Relativity "almost, but not entirely" as a metaphor, to express the inseparability of time and space in literature, or in meaning-construction (84). My previous discussion of the *ground* of positioning and difference (the unique positioning of the speaking subject in time and space) has in turn prepared the ground for an understanding of the term "chronotope" in historical poetics. Specific forms or "spheres" of language use, what Bakhtin calls *speech genres*, are defined by their *chronotopes*, by the times and spaces which give rise to them, and to which they are integrally linked. It is a measure of the inability of traditional literary studies to account for and link literature and history that Bakhtin had to go in search of a term to describe the connectedness of time and space in the conditions of textuality. Bakhtin, however, failed to find a

corresponding term to describe "the heterogeneity and subtlety of the idea" that the fool introduces into literature (166). One of the elements of complexity introduced by the fool is the "intervalic chronotope," or scenes which the foolishness of the fool interrupts, or "is an interval in," in the main chronotope of the text (Morson, *Prosaics* 404). The intervalic chronotope may also be "hidden," a chronotope glimpsed only at certain, de-stabilizing moments (404). The implication of the intervalic chronotope is that it foregrounds "the possibility of viewing action from two different chronotopic perspectives," highlighting the fact that every chronotope is just one of many possible chronotopes (404). To increase the level of complexity even further, we noted earlier that the fool is "other" to the reigning author-ity in every sense. He represents "a metamorphosis of tsar and god." The transformed figure is therefore located "in the nether world, in death" (*Chronotope* 161). Just as the radically other fool is a mask, just as he wears many and *all* identities and therefore none, so too is his "positioning" an impossibly unstable and shifting position among both the living and the dead. He crosses all ontological boundaries. This is the unnerving ambivalence and freedom of the fool--at once terrifying and exhilarating. "The ground slips from under our feet, and we are dizzy because we find nothing stable around us....[in the] universal and radical destruction of all moral and social stability" (*Rabelais* 42).

We find all of these complexities of positioning--from a firm footing to a fragile instability--in the Wood Mountain chronotope, with all of the multi-layered and complex implications this has for identity. Suknaski makes use of, or constructs, intervalic chronotopes in order to resurrect the dead and to provoke them to dialogue.

This has great implications for the predominant everyday chronotope of Wood Mountain. He is the Holy Fool of the nether regions, carrying with him as well a folk form called "the cult of the dead," deriving from pre-Christian Slavic traditions. The dead are "the parents," the ancestors who tie us, attach us, irrevocably, to chronotopes, to the times and spaces where the problem and the work of identity- and meaning- construction begins and ends, and which is, finally, the ground (the womb and the grave) of our "positioning" in the "kinship-community" of great time (Fedotov I:15). The "cult of the dead" is a carnival form, tied to the seasons, which grounds Suknaski's Holy Fool in life, in the coordinates of his birth and his death, and that of his ancestors, in Wood Mountain and in the Carpathian Mountains of eastern Europe. The Holy Fool enables Suknaski to ground himself at the same time as he operationalizes "intervalic chronotopes," the liberating and destabilizing implication of which is that time itself is relative, as Einstein established, that "there is no such thing as a fixed interval of time independent of the system to which it refers" (Holquist, *Bakhtin* 70). For Bakhtin, the only system of reference is placement, or positioning, mediated by and constitutive of the self/other exchange. The only certainty in this situation is the imperative of the *process* of self/other relations, and as we have seen, this process is contingent in many complex ways.

This is "the merry science" of dialogism (65). The problem with this jolly relativity of things is the problem of responsibility. If my self and my positioning are so highly contingent and interdependent, if being is really "co-being," how can "I" be accountable for the "self" I am able to posit in the various chronotopes available to

me? How do we account for, or how can we be made to account for the "uniqueness" of our motivated and executed actions? In thinking through this problem, Bakhtin put forward the notion of "answerability." Answerability is the distinctiveness of the self's response arising from the distinct place it occupies in space and time. Again, to ensure there is no mistaking this distinctiveness of response with transcendental essences, Holquist identifies the homologous "answering" in the biological study of life forms (in which Bakhtin had a keen interest):

If the [life] form has the capacity to react to a stimulus, such as light, it is alive. If it does not change in the presence of altered circumstances, it is constructed as not having life. In other words, at this primitive level, the capacity to react to, or interact with, the environment is the test of life.... The protozoan...needs what lies outside the oozy borders of its integral shape to ensure continuation of the internal, reactive capacity that is defined as its life. Responding to the environment, being able to answer it, is life itself. Whatever engenders a particular response of the organism in a specific situation--if only the lowly hydra's shrinking from light--is the center of its life. (66)

At the level of complexity of human life, the self is answerable *to* the social environment. "What the self is answerable *for* is the authorship of its responses" (68). The self is not a metaphysical abstract, but a fact of life at the biological level. It is in this sense that the imperative of "authoring" (a self, an other, a text) constitutes Suknaski's answerability. What I have referred to as his "literary materials," his social or textual environment, constitute the *conditions of his answerability*, or that which he engages as "other" in his project and projection of a self. It is these conditions which give rise to his own "distinctive" text, his distinct answer to the world. And for this

answering (authoring), Suknaski is responsible. This dependence on the other and the resultant responsibility for the authorship of our responses is not a miserable, fated and alienating condition, however, dragging the self down from its aspirations to transcendent heights. Rather, in Bakhtin alterity is a friendly condition. As we have seen, Bakhtin does make use of binary oppositions, such as self/other, but only in the way in which they are most useful: to describe relational poles of possibility rather than absolutes. Bakhtin's resistance to fixing or fixating on specific points on the continuum arises from his concern for mapping the flux of life, rather than trying to fix it. This is precisely why he found biological and physical models useful and why he adopted them "almost, but not entirely" as metaphors. Bakhtin saw cultural forms as directly connected to and arising from biological imperatives (in his concept of answering as the life response, and of genres as organisms, for example). But in Bakhtin, biological imperatives are not so much limitations as enabling mechanisms. Alterity is what enables us to posit selves.

This, finally, is the ground of an historical or sociological poetics, a poetics which can dialogize Suknaski's texts at the level of utterance as well as at the level of social intercourse or interaction with the world. But in this historical process, I too am answerable. It is for this reason that I have chosen "ethnography" as a metaphor ("almost, but not entirely") to designate the distinctiveness of my response to Suknaski. I choose ethnography partly because, in engaging Suknaski, I am engaging or dialogizing my own past, and my own literary inheritance. Fortunately or not, I was born into a world in southern Saskatchewan, on the edge of the Wood Mountain

hills, a world that was "already written," and written partly by Suknaski. Suknaski may be said to have "interrupted" the text of my life (he constitutes an intervalic chronotope), as I read his texts, which gave form and assigned value to my world as literature. Later, in the early 1980s, Suknaski and I became friends in Regina. This familiarity with Suknaski and his world is the basis on which I will introduce biographical and contextual information from my "excess of seeing" him and his world. I am both of this world and *transgredient* to it. My authority in writing this paper is partly based on this, and like the ethnographer, my task will be to convince you not only that I have been "there" (I have seen the other) but that, had you been there in my shoes or in my "self," you would have seen the same things.

Chapter Two

The Novelization of Suknaski's Poetry...

I've read Andy's poems and, well as far as I'm concerned they're good. I don't see anything wrong with them. A lot of them say that half of the stuff isn't true, which I don't believe. I know for a fact that...I'd say ninety per cent of the stuff in there is true. And naturally, you've got to add a little bit, just to make...make it a little good. [Laughter].

-- Lee Soparlo⁴

If we discard the notion of genres as fixed literary forms, it is immediately and strikingly apparent that Suknaski's poetry has more in common with the novel form than with that of poetry. His characteristic selection of "an imaginary place to begin" at the opening of almost every poem is not normally an issue in poetry. Poems have the generic advantage of being able to simply begin, the more directly the better, with the disembodied voice of the poet. This is why the apprenticeship of writing poetry is referred to as "finding one's voice":

in the majority of poetic genres, the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality as reflected in his

language and speech, which is directly realized in this unity, are indispensable prerequisites of poetic style. (Bakhtin, *Novel* 264)

Suknaski, by contrast, more resembles the narrator of a novel, establishing a perspective on his material and negotiating his credentials to be able to tell a story. This is not only a "problem" in Suknaski. It most often becomes the problem of the poem. These poems ask "Who speaks?" Only in establishing this does Suknaski find the point of entry into the narrative. This process is strikingly visible in "Dance in the Wood Mountain Community Hall":

it was spring
and i was home again
he sat down in a chair across from me and said
"you know
i've been watching you
i'm a poet too
and i've noticed even though you seem to be having a good time
nothing here has turned your crank...anyway
i thought i'd come and talk to you
i write poems about people too
i want to write one about you
but first i have to get an impression of you..."
for the first few seconds
we simply looked at one another
the silence heavy
the possible poem looming somewhere between us
like the scent of a fat pheasant in rosebushes
where two coyotes have arrived
both motionless and waiting
for the first sound
of crumpling leaves...
(*Ghosts* 1)

I will come back to this question of "Who speaks?" For now, I draw attention to the

obvious process of the positioning of both speaker and addressee, which is built into the poem rather than occurring anterior to it, and the elaborate location of the narrative thread by means of this positioning.

The second novelistic feature of Suknaski's poetry is the emphasis placed on the development of this narrative rather than on the dynamics of the "image-as-trope," which we find in more strictly poetic genres. What is important in "Dance in the Wood Mountain Community Hall," and what is discovered, can only be revealed by means of the narrative, or of the story itself, both in its unfolding in the time and space of the poem, and in its content. Typically, the event of this particular story (poem) turns out to be an extension of this dialogue between the poet/narrator and the poet/other (he turns out to be a "poet rancher"). This dialogue is presented in the *form* of a dialogue, in which other narratives are embedded.

The characters in Suknaski's novelized poems appear and reappear in different roles, both inside and outside the poems (the borders are permeable), in dedications and acknowledgements, and in the poems themselves, as storytellers, listeners, witnesses, adversaries, and companions. Their presence "outside" the text verifies their existence as historical as well as textual characters. They embody the form-shaping perspective of Wood Mountain, grounding what is said and who says it--in bodies, in space, and in time. These characters are often the speakers in the poems, and they are announced in the titles, such as "Gus Lecaine Speaking of Grandfather Okute" (*Wood* 53), "Big Bear Speaking to Thomas Trueman Quinn" (*Ghosts* 12), or "Mrs Gowanlock Remembering Duck Lake" (13). In other places, the speaker is

introduced in italics, underneath the title, as in "Gunnar Folgerberg *lee soparlo speaking*" (85), or "Three Coffins Dream (circa 1850) *julia suknaski remembering*" (75). Even if they do not speak, characters are presented in these poems as coordinates in the world of Wood Mountain. In "Soren Caswell" (*Wood* 33), Caswell is envisioned as someone who "no longer wears his hearing aid / and seldom speaks-- is merely a smile in the corner" of the pub at closing time. Twenty pages later, the poem "Gus Lecaine Speaking to Grandfather Okute" is set in the same pub (the only pub). The fact that "soren caswell sleeps dreaming in his lonely corner" is casually mentioned as forming part of the context of Lecaine's speech. This placement of people as coordinates gives these poems their cumulative novelistic density, a three-dimensional quality which ties all of the poems together as a single utterance. A character called Philip Well makes his first appearance in "Homestead, 1914" (*Wood* 19-26), where he is casually referred to, as if we already know who he is, as Andrew Suknaski Sr.'s closest neighbour in the first lonely years of "proving up"⁵ his homestead. Philip Well and the poet's father "hunt together / and through long evenings / play cards by light of the coaloil lamp / spin tales of old country wanderings..." (21). Philip Well next appears in a poem bearing his name twenty pages later. Actually, he disappears, because it is the story of his suicide. As Suknaski tries to reconstruct this man, who everyone knew but who somehow remained a stranger, he remembers another story his father told him about Philip Well's companionship in the homesteading days. This links the two poems together. But in this story, precipitated by a death, Philip Well and Suknaski Sr. were

companions who once "nearly burned to death" in a torched haystack one night. Near the end of this volume of poems, Philip Well shows up again, and again casually, as Dunc McPherson relates the story of how he met his wife, Babe. It was

...when he and philip well were blacksmiths east of the old post:
i was shaping shoes when i heard horses whinnying
i looked up and there was babe...
 ("Dunc and Babe McPherson" *Wood* 112-13)

Here McPherson uses Philip Well as a reference point, the way we mention who was with us at significant points in our lives or in our stories, but Dunc also calls up Philip Well as a witness to his life-long love affair with Babe. In retrospect, after reading the other two poems in which Well appears, what recurs is his association with companionship, love and loss. Philip Well functions as a repository of these values. They constitute the *form* he takes in these poems. Even the poem about Well's suicide ends with these associations:

today in wood mountain
 men's faces are altered by well's passing
 while they drink coffee in jimmy hoy's cafe
 no one remembers if well had a sweetheart
 though someone remembers a school dance near
 the montana border one christmas--
 well drunk and sleeping on a bench in the corner
 while the people danced...
 ("Philip Well" *Wood* 39-40)

But these values are not easily available, if at all, by reading just one of these poems

in isolation. Philip Well only takes shape as he is presented and seen in the different contexts of the three poems, widely dispersed through Wood Mountain Poems.

Suknaski's characters are not symbolic of anything but themselves. They can only be "read" in their context, which is the context of Suknaski's entire utterance.

There are many such examples of reappearing characters and the subsequent layering of the narrative of Wood Mountain. Lee Soparlo is a central character who commonly appears on the acknowledgement pages, credited as "both Wood Mountain's and the author's memory" (*Wood* 125). Lee Soparlo is also the poet's companion and just as often a storyteller who speaks in his own words. Soparlo appears in four major poems in Wood Mountain Poems, including one bearing his name as its title. He appears again in the next book, The Ghosts Call You Poor, in both the acknowledgements and in a poem about a community called "Săt" (65). Jimmy Hoy is a character we view and hear from varying vantage points in five poems. His name appears again many years later in the dedication of Silk Trail, a book about the Chinese labourers ("coolies") who built the western end of the national railroad. Jim Lovenzanna appears in three poems and his tractor makes a couple of appearances on its own. Vasile Tonita appears in, or is referred to, in at least seven poems. He is Marie Soparlo's father and therefore Lee Soparlo's father-in-law, as Suknaski explains in "Săt." This is a presentation of characters which will be relevant to our study of time in these texts (the characters are related generationally, *through* time).

In the same way that the characters become familiar, so does the site of the

poems. Wood Mountain characters always position themselves to speak in relation to Wood Mountain, and/or to one of the sub-chronotopes within the larger time and space of Wood Mountain. These sites, which also become familiar, include Vasile Tonita's pasture, or his pool hall, Jimmy Hoy's cafe, the Suknaski homestead, the Old Post, the Sioux reserve, John Soparlo's (Lee's brother) grain elevator, the West Central Pub, and so on. Even those poems which seemingly take place elsewhere are presented in relation to Wood Mountain. The speaker is from there, or is leaving or returning, or somehow, in the manner of gossip and rumour, their stories "got around" to Wood Mountain. As Robert Kroetsch says, even Suknaski's book about the Northwest Territories becomes "an extension of Wood Mountain, an extension of his own (language) speech" (132). All of these interwoven characters, times and spaces point to the fact that a reading of Suknaski's *books* is more productive than readings of individual poems. These poems are not stand-alone literary artifacts, and further, each book is an instalment in what amounts to a series. Each poem or book can of course be read by itself, but the reading is much informed and more layered when read in light of the previous books or poems.

Suknaski's poems are indeed novelistic "baggy monsters." Read over time they become even baggier, displaying a complete disregard for the poetic value of economy. In 1982 *Brick* magazine published a long *letter/floating diary/poem/review* by Suknaski in which he dialogizes the poetry and history of other writers, grounding his account of their work in his Wood Mountain chronotopic vision (*Narayan* 5-56). With a notion of genres as fixed and discrete forms of literary practice, we could only

say that he is some kind of literary imperialist, that he Wood Mountain-izes the world. We might even be tempted to say that he de-differentiates it as he pushes at and ultimately transgresses the boundaries of his own chosen genre (in "daring" or "quaint" or "unacceptable" ways). The critic M. Travis Lane expresses impatience with the bagginess of Suknaski's monsters. In a review of In the Name of Narid, Lane accuses the poet of lacking "verbal eloquence." He says that Suknaski should abandon poetry and write prose. Lane is particularly irked by what I have referred to as Suknaski's obvious process of positioning both the speaker and the addressee, which is built into the poems rather than occurring anterior to it. Lane's critique is so appallingly dismissive and condescending that it would be laughable if the consequences were not so harsh for a poet with such a tenuous grasp on his right to speak in the first place. His comments are an example of how ahistorical and static conceptions of genres lead to criticism that has nothing whatever to say about Suknaski's poetry. Lane writes:

Indeed the lack of verbal eloquence characteristic of Suknaski's writings suggests to me that his real talent is not poetic and that his confusing of sentiment with poetry is leading him away from art. Under the different disciplines of prose Suknaski might write more forcefully, omitting the insipidating [sic] white spaces of his verse forms, abbreviating the pious expressions of sentiment, writing instead of "at the edge of suknatskyj's vision" simply what was there to be seen as naturally as his characters speak. For certainly it is what is commonly thought of as "poetic" in Suknaski's poetry that makes it weak.... (72)

Lane wonders if Suknaski's habit of "explaining" the positioning of perspective in his poems may be due to the fact that, in his mind, he addresses the "unsophisticated

audience" from "the world which is the subject of [his] verse" (72). As a member of this audience, I take great exception to Lane's dismissal. But before I answer this critic, I will "position" his comments within the context of the general reception of Suknaski's work.

Most critical comment on Suknaski appears in the form of book reviews. Usually, three or four volumes by various writers are dealt with in a single article. To Lane's credit, he is one of the few who attempt to say *something* about Suknaski. Most of the other reviewers are vaguely positive, and everyone acknowledges the popularity and impact of Suknaski's work when it began to appear in book-form in the mid-1970s. When Lane says "that Suknaski's poetic failings are "probably...less apparent in a stage reading," he alludes to Suknaski's captivating and theatrical presentations of his poems in person. He "performs" the dialogue of his characters in voices and accents. He wears what he calls a "holy fool's cap," which can be a simple farmer's cap with SASK WHEAT POOL or some other slogan on it. He often has a guitar and other props, such as home-made icons or candles, and he does not so much "give a reading" as sing, howl, rant, chant and tell stories. If Suknaski has been ill-treated or ignored by literary criticism, he has been better served by his audiences, his readers and by other poets. Dennis Lee calls him "the touchstone figure" in the prairie documentary school, following in the footsteps of Anne Marriott, Dorothy Livesay, and John Newlove. Lee credits Suknaski with establishing "a normative range of subjects" and a "normative voice (anecdotal vernacular)" for the genre, and with constituting its new centre of gravity with Wood Mountain Poems (xxiii-xxiv).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Suknaski began writing and making concrete poetry as part of the circle of experimental poets encouraged by Earle Birney in Vancouver. He was one of thirty "new" poets selected to appear in Al Purdy's 1971 anthology Storm Warning, and introduced as among those likely to "replace the Birneys and Laytons and Cohens in the near future" (23). According to Suknaski, when Margaret Laurence met him for the first time, she immediately thanked him for Wood Mountain Poems, saying it validated her own project of writing the story of western Canada. I think Suknaski has been valued by other writers because they have an intuitive, if not explicit, understanding of the sources of literature in *ways of seeing the world* and particularly, in ways of seeing it from *outside* and *below*, the position which affords the greatest "excess of seeing." They value Suknaski's work because it is close to these sources and it makes it available to them, as it will to us. Unfortunately, poets have their own work to do, so it falls to the likes of M. Travis Lane to include Suknaski in, or exclude him from, the "tradition" of literature and literary studies.

Lane does not so much exclude Suknaski as accuse the poet of excluding himself by refusing to stay within the boundaries of poetic genres. It is precisely at this point that we need a poetics grounded in both a theory of language and a theory of social intercourse, and which can therefore account for genres and the interaction of genres in historical terms. For Bakhtin, "genres are not unique to literature but also govern daily speech" (Morson, *Prosaics* 275). Literary genres are "secondary" speech genres, differing from the "primary" genres of everyday speech only by degrees of complexity. The relation of utterance to genre lies in the social markers, the outer

boundaries of the utterance, articulated by *the change of speaking subjects*. The speaker selects a particular speech genre because the type of genre indicates the outer boundary of the (relatively) finalized utterance. This boundary must be demarcated in order to elicit, and to some extent determine, an active response. This results in the "active role of the other in the process of communication" (Bakhtin, *Speech* 70). The utterance can therefore only proceed by way of the speech genre. Speech genres are "relatively stable and normative forms of the utterance":

A large number of genres that are widespread in everyday life are so standard that the speaker's individual speech will is manifested only in its choice of a particular genre, and, perhaps, in its expressive intonation. Such, for example, are the various everyday genres of greetings, farewells, congratulations, all kinds of wishes, information about health, business and so forth. These genres are so diverse because they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication. These genres have high, strictly official, respectful forms as well as familiar ones. (79)

Individual emotion, evaluation and expression are produced in the process of the live usage of these genres. This intonation arises from the speaker's positioning in time and space in relation to the way in which the speech genre has been uttered previously, and in relation to how it may be uttered in the future:

The speaker is not Adam, and therefore the subject of his speech itself inevitably becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners (in a conversation or dispute about some everyday event) or other viewpoints, world views, trends, theories, and so forth.... World views, trends, viewpoints and opinions always have verbal expression.

All this is others' speech...and it cannot but be reflected in the utterance. (94)

A second element of the utterance, which follows from the speaker having to mark the outer boundary, is "its quality of being directed to someone, its *addressivity*" (95). This is the constitutive role of *otherness* in Bakhtin's theory of language, which leads directly to a theory of social intercourse. Familiar and intimate genres enable or require the speaker to perceive the addressee as being "more or less outside the framework of the social hierarchy and social conventions, *without rank*, as it were. This gives rise to a certain candour of speech.... Since speech constraints and conventions have fallen away, one can take a special, unofficial, volitional approach to reality" (97). Bakhtin provides the example of "the loud candour of the streets, calling things by their real names" (97n). These familiar genres were freely adapted by the first writers of novels during the Renaissance, when the historical task was "to destroy traditional official styles and world views that had faded and become conventional" (97).

M. Travis Lane is correct, then, in his understanding of the importance of the addressee in Suknaski's poetic utterance. It's just that Suknaski, according to Lane, addresses the *wrong* addressee. Lane would prefer that Suknaski address *him*. He would have Suknaski adopt a more "objectively neutral style," but he does not acknowledge the assumptions Suknaski must be able to make in order to adopt such a style. An "objectively neutral style" of language use, as a form of familiar genre, presupposes "an identity of the addressee and the speaker, a unity of their viewpoints"

(Bakhtin, *Speech* 98). To address Lane in this familiar way, Suknaski would have to be able to assume that he has the right to speak; he would have to feel in command of the poetic genre, defined by Lane as "the moment immortal" (74); and he would have to assume that he inhabits the same world as Lane--the official world of poetry as embodied in The Fiddlehead, the Dalhousie English department, and so on. Finally, he would have to be able to assume that his addressee from such a world would understand and would be able to respond *in kind* to his subject matter.

Of course Suknaski can assume none of these things. The "objective correlative"--definiteness and impersonality--of Lane's classical lyricism was simply not available to Suknaski, because of his positioning in time and space, because of the particular range and kind of speech genres available to him there, and because of the links these speech genres have to still-living sources in folk culture and oral traditions. By examining these conditioning features of Suknaski's utterance--the conditions of his answerability--we will chart the immense distance between his world and that of M. Travis Lane.

Chapter Three

...and the Wood Mountainization of the World

"As a Canadian writer," Suknaski writes,

I am mostly concerned with finding a cipher that will decode a fourfold dream: the Anglo-Saxon's dream and search for the Northwest Passage to further expand the British Empire....the European immigrant's dream of a New Jerusalem in the new life (a second chance) in the New World; the Chinese dream of the 'Golden Mountains' in California, or the 'Gold Mountain' in Canada's West...and finally the Amerindian dreaming of homeland, Manitou's *abundance* to keep body and spirit where no boundaries are ever drawn.... (Silk 96)

Suknaski awoke to this fourfold dream in Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, a village near the U.S. border. Wood Mountain is where the Sioux settled when Sitting Bull fled U.S. troops in 1876, after the battle of Little Big Horn (Archer 59). It's the site of a North West Mounted Police (NWMP, later RCMP) and Hudson's Bay Company trading post, and one of three main sites of Roumanian immigrant settlement in Canada. The land at Wood Mountain is not prime in terms of modern agricultural practices. Much of it is rolling prairie, rocky, and with a relatively thin layer of topsoil. It is more suited to ranching, which has been the major agricultural activity in the area since settlement. The type of land is an important and defining feature of any area in the west, as the "most desirable" settlers were granted the best land. They

were usually from the United Kingdom or the United States. Light land or heavily wooded land was granted to those defined as "ethnic" (Kostash 21), partly because that is all that was available by the time immigration was opened to eastern Europeans. Roumanians, of course, are "ethnic," as are the Poles, the Ukrainians and the Serbs who settled the Wood Mountain area. This ethnic mix was further enriched by the Métis descendants of Hudson's Bay Company employees (who had been French-speaking), by the few remaining Sioux, and by the *halfbreeds*, their descendants who had intermarried with settlers, NWMP officers or Hudson's Bay Company workers.

By the time the poet was growing up, Wood Mountain's "Old Post" survived only in legend. Those Sioux who had not returned to the U.S. to live out their fates with Sitting Bull had mostly died of smallpox. The survivors disappeared into larger aboriginal communities in the Qu'Appelle Valley or in the cities, or they worked as casual farm and ranch labourers. A few took up farming on the Wood Mountain reserve. The RCMP showed up yearly to perform their musical ride at the Wood Mountain Rodeo. The predominant Roumanian identity mapped onto this "past" and remained in the form of distinctive family names, a lingering oral tradition, the occasional publication of ethnic cookbooks, and peculiar wedding and funeral customs presided over by Eastern Orthodox priests.

Suknaski was born in 1942, although he does not know the exact date, because his mother cannot remember if it was an hour, a day, or two days that she lay half-conscious in their farm shack east of Wood Mountain after giving birth. She does not know how long she lay there before she had the strength to clean up the child and

herself, and walk the six miles to town to have him baptized. Suknaski says that his birthday is "July 30th or 31st, or maybe the 29th."

The poet's mother, Julia Suknaski, was a deeply religious and superstitious woman. She was Polish and her husband was Ukrainian. They were in turn the children of peasant farmers, from near the Carpathian Mountains, an area of perennially shifting borders between Poland, Ukraine, and Roumania. Neither of Suknaski's parents became fluent in English. Suknaski has described his father as "a man who still has difficulty with twelve languages," in reference to his barely literate but multilingual skills gained in polyglot rural eastern Europe before the outbreak of WWI. Suknaski's father was prone to mysterious and violent rages, during which he warned his family to "do all you can and help one another save yourselves / from me" (*Wood* 25). The poet recounts a story of him once "beating mother with a rolling pin / by the cream separator" when she was pregnant. Other stories tell of the father's attempts to kill two of Suknaski's brothers, one by beating with a fencepost, the other by hanging.

Suknaski was the youngest of seven children. A brother, Peter, died as an infant. Suknaski records his brief existence in a poem he wrote when he found Peter's death certificate "in the charred records / flung by the new storekeeper / into the nuisance grounds" ("Registration of Death/Canada: Province of Saskatchewan" *Narid* 83). A sister, Eve, had multiple sclerosis but for years was treated as a psychiatric patient (electro-shock and drug therapy) in St. Boniface, Manitoba. She died at age 29, just as the village of Wood Mountain took up a collection for Mrs Suknaski's bus

fare to go see her ("To Whom It May Concern/Re: Miss Eve Suknatskyj, Age 29" *Narid* 91). A brother, Mike, served in the Korean war. It was Mike who was nearly hanged by his father, punishment for accidentally tipping over a bucket of water. A sister, Pauline, became a nurse. She lives in Lethbridge, Alberta, where she is married to "Bill Lee," to whom Suknaski's Silk Trail is dedicated. A brother, Louis, the one who had the fencepost raised menacingly over his head, and another sister, Scphie, live in Winnipeg.

Julia Suknaski left her husband, "leading the children through the fall / stubble to wood mountain," when Suknaski was still quite young. After that, he only met his father once each year "in the back alley behind koester's store." His father would place a side of pork on young Suknaski's sleigh, provisions for winter, and disappear for another year. In his teens, Suknaski quit high school and became a migrant worker and sometime student at universities and art colleges. He wandered through the prairie provinces, British Columbia, Europe and Australia for seventeen years before returning to write Wood Mountain Poems in 1976.

Questions of time and space are understandably of critical importance to a poet in these circumstances. Neither coordinate can be taken for granted. I have already noted Suknaski's recomposition of his brother's death certificate. In the same way, the poem about his sister Eve draws upon and takes the form of her psychiatric assessment. And in a poem called "Homestead, 1914" (*Wood* 24), which contains much of this biographical information, Suknaski confronts the questionable nature of his origins, signified by his own strange documentation, a birth certificate issued in

Cyrillic script by the Wood Mountain Roumanian Orthodox Church:

carrying it in my pocket now as father carried
 the worn \$10 bill across his heart for the landtitle
 i have crossed bridges of cities
 hoping to find salvation
 have gazed into the dark rivers of
 spring where others found love
 hoping to glimpse the face of some god--
 and stopped by grey-eyed policemen
 produced identification and tolerated their jokes:
what do these numbers and letters mean kid?
where is this place?
is this all you have?

Al Purdy was struck by Suknaski's preoccupation with situating himself in time and space when he selected and edited the poems for Wood Mountain Poems. Purdy refers to the "elasticity of time" in Suknaski's work:

the poems are a clear look at people and places of Wood Mountain, seeing both past and present simultaneously with a kind of double vision. The poem-viewpoint shifts abruptly, for time exists as a territory to explore.... (*Introduction* 11)

Because Suknaski can take nothing for granted, his poetry foregrounds questions of time and space. He tries to pinpoint himself on the map and locate himself within history. His poetry is an attempt to envision time *in* space, the space of Wood Mountain, to reconstruct the past which apparently produced him and which might therefore be able to "account" for him and make him visible in that landscape. In

order to account for himself, Suknaski has to produce a special type of utterance, a *genre* which will make it possible to see and to give utterance to that which has been invisible, namely, himself, his family, his history. For this he drew on the "familiar" genre of what Dennis Lee calls the "anecdotal vernacular," the genre of the everyday speech of Wood Mountain. This new genre, however, had also to constitute a new way of conceiving of time (history) and space (Wood Mountain) because "official" and received world views and perspectives on history did not include Suknaski. The fact that Suknaski found the death certificate, the only record of his infant brother's life, in the town dump, is just one dramatic example of how the official world view, even the marginal worldview of Wood Mountain, did not include him. Another example is the 1967 publication of They Came to Wood Mountain, a local history compiled by the Wood Mountain Historical Society. There is no record of the Suknaski family in this history, except for a passing mention of Suknaski's father as having bought one Eli Straza's homestead when Straza found a better one (68). It is obvious that if Suknaski is going to exist in this world, he needs a new *ground of representability* on which to construct the text of himself.

Besides the elements of everyday or "familiar" speech and a new conception of time and space, this new genre would have to take the form of its very content. Its "being" would have to coincide with the utterance it was to make possible, because this genre's content would have to effect an *inversion* of value. It would have to valorize an *other* history and an *other* identity for Suknaski. This is why the genre which Suknaski produces adopts the form and the strategies of the carnivalesque.

Central to its constitution is the ambivalent mask of the holy fool. These three elements--familiar, everyday speech, a new conception of time, and strategies of the carnivalesque--constitute the genre of the novel, which, as is evident here, is really a "force" or an "anti-genre" (Morson, *Prosaics* 351) rather than a fixed literary form. This is how the novelization of Suknaski's poetry arises from his historical task of pinpointing himself on the map and locating himself within history. Suknaski's concern with "finding a cipher that will decode a fourfold dream" is his awareness of the imperative that he find or produce a genre that will permit of a new way of seeing the world, one that includes himself as a coordinate, and as the product of coordinates. This explicitly positions Suknaski, and the postcolonial subject (the European and Asian immigrants and the aboriginal inhabitants of his fourfold dream), at the other end of the historical process that was unleashed at the time of the novel's emergence nearly five hundred years ago. We will remember that, in Bakhtin's paradigm, the novel arose to solve a specific problem. This was the problem of exposing "the other side of established values, so that new bearings could be taken":

Thought and speech had to be placed under such conditions that the world could expose its other side: the side that was hidden, that nobody talked about, that did not fit the words and forms of prevailing philosophy. America was still to be discovered, the Antipodes reached, the Western hemisphere explored, and the question arose: "What is under our feet?" Thought and word were searching for a new reality beyond the visible horizon of official philosophy. (*Rabelais* 271-2)

Suknaski's search for a cipher to decode the "fourfold dream," then, is also the

indicator of his positioning at the other end--the receiving and answering end--of this historical process. In "Dreaming of the Northwest Passage" (*Ghosts* 7-10), Suknaski's characteristic positioning of himself within the poem (his negotiation of a place to start, which is his establishing of a perspective on his material) becomes also his positioning within the historical process which produced him in the first place, and to which he now prepares an answer:

dreaming of the northwest passage
 a polar ocean highway to the eastern world
 and searching for an imaginary place to begin
 some entry into the possible
 taken by bearing straight from the point where
 the longitude of the old
 intersects the latitude of the new
 that point
 where the nebulous meaning of north
 becomes the possible refuge
 our first bronzed ancestor ambles to
 season by season
 sandia man
 folsom man
 the dorsets
 thule
 before commerce greed and all voyages begin...

Suknaski's novelized poem focuses on the *names* of the explorer's ships, the *vessels* by which contact was made. In recontextualizing these names, Suknaski "turns them over," as words, to find out what is hidden on the other side of them:

...always dreaming of the passage
 the scottish and british mariners

chose their ships' names well

hecla

griper

searchthrift

discovery

gabriel

fury

blossom

erebus

terror

and you sail with them
 on the vast sea within your ancestral sleep
 till you dream of nothing
 but men and ships battered and broken
 by ice and wind
 men burned by merciless northern sun till faces
 swell and crack
 bleeding
 and you become obsessed
 with the whole chronicle of obsessions
 why we all dream
 why we travel yearning for other things and places
 and become obsessed...

What Suknaski finds on the hidden other side of this "discovery," this "conquest," which held out the New Jerusalem for his peasant parents, is desperation and madness.

This poem should be foundational in studies of the emergence of the postcolonial subject in the Canadian context. It traces the trajectory of the colonial expansion, from John Cabot to Sir John Franklin, finally arriving at "erebus," the name of Franklin's wrecked ship, translated as "whence nothing returns." There is no going back from the New World. The very conditions that made this New World visible,

and the expansion possible, now enable, even require, Suknaski to reverse the gaze in order to utter his response, which is the process of constructing a new identity for himself. This is the awakening of the postcolonial subject in our time. The same force of novelness, or novelization, which enabled western Europe to *see* the New World, and then to inhabit it--by invasion and conquest--has necessarily and paradoxically opened up categories of identity and possibilities of being that did not exist before, and which can now only be inhabited or embodied by those who were positioned *to be looked at*, the colonial subject. That is, those categories were expressly created to enable western Europe to see and therefore dominate the colonial subject. But now that this subject's identity has been "operationalized" in this historical trajectory, now that the colonial subject is awakened to the role it has played in this historical process, this role, and every other vestige of the identity of the colonial subject, formed in the Colonial Encounter, is changed or changing. The utterance of the *postcolonial* subject requires and produces a new level of transgression. We can now see the world and ourselves only through the postcolonial subject's emergent categories of perception. It is in this sense that we are all "postcolonial subjects," positioned in relation to this emergence. We are all marginalized in the process of globalization. Rather than the postcolonial subject "attaining" centrality, the margins have expanded, causing awareness of the margins as central to the symbolic (and empirical) spatialisation of the world.

This is what readers of Suknaski may call "the Wood Mountainization of the world." It is what Suknaski finds on the hidden, other side of things. The

postcolonial subject no longer coincides with the identity which the conquest, begun during the Renaissance, has provided. This is how it is that ethnographers now encounter their "subjects" talking back and making demands of their own in the writing of texts. The postcolonial subject has emerged by way of an *answering* by Suknaski and others, an answer in response to the historical utterance of the conquest of, and holocaust in, the New World. As a result of this answering, which we are witnessing now, and in which Suknaski was an early respondent, there is a new indeterminacy and a sense of the ground shifting beneath our feet. This process is again being made visible first in literary texts, and specifically, in what we call *postmodern* texts. Old genres are sifted through and new genres are tested in the current tumultuous process of producing a new historical genre capable of giving form to a new utterance, a new *kind* of utterance that will produce the new categories of identity which are now required to accommodate postcolonial subjects in their state of becoming something other than the identity provided by the "conquest." Suknaski cannot be seen as a strictly postmodern poet, notwithstanding the famous imprecision of that term, but he can most productively be seen as a poet who helped to prepare the ground for the present postmodern moment. His openness to the crossing of borders--between genres, between self and other, between text and world--was never, for him, so much an aesthetic choice as an imperative, a historical necessity. The process by which his new kind of utterance, his new genre, is brought into being, is what we can now only provisionally call *novelization*. Provisionally, because this new genre will eventually have its own name. The very name of the *novel* links it to the historical

process of which it is both the condition and the product. In turn it is engendering a new historical answering, or utterance, the trajectory and shape of which we do not yet know.

The conditions of Suknaski's answerability, then, are the familiar, everyday speech genres available to him in Wood Mountain, his tentative positioning in time and space, and his proximity to still-living sources of folk culture, which gives him "generic contact" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 157) with the carnivalesque utterance and identity of the holy fool. And the novelization of genres is indicated precisely by these conditions: by the special use of language, by a distinct conceptualization of historical time and social space, and by strategies of the carnivalesque.

Chapter Four

The Special Use of Language

*My poems are not my life; they are not even part of my life.
A poem is a sniper ready to assassinate everything worth believing in--or living for.*

-- Suknaski⁶

Suknaski's texts are opened to the centrifugal forces of the languages of Wood Mountain, in contrast to strictly poetic genres, which are animated by the "image-as-trope" (Bakhtin, *Novel* 278). The movement in poetic genres is in the other direction. It is centripetal, as the poet does not put the otherness of language to artistic use, but instead works to remove and isolate words from their social context, to "strip the word of others' intentions":

Everything that enters the [poetic] work must immerse itself in Lethe, and forget its previous life in any other contexts: language may remember only its life in poetic contexts....Everywhere there is only one face--the linguistic face of the author, answering for every word as if it were his own. (297)

Suknaski's special use of language, which results in the novelization of his texts, is the

construction of his texts *as if no word were his own*. Every word, every language, every genre remembers every context in which it has "lived." At the level of the word, Suknaski's texts are open to forces of social heteroglossia. At the level of national languages, they are open to polyglossia, the manylanguageedness of Wood Mountain. At the level of genre, they are open to the familiar forms of everyday speech. When these everyday genres penetrate poetic forms, the boundaries of poetic genres are made permeable; they are left open to any and all other genres, including letters, diaries, explorer's reports and journals. Rather than trying to carefully and strictly delineate his genre, by keeping out or by disallowing that which is other to his authorial intentions, Suknaski allows his intentions or themes to be refracted through the many *languages* of Wood Mountain. According to Bakhtin,

this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, . . . dialogization--this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (263)

Suknaski puts these tendencies and possibilities of the living word to artistic use, which is why the study of his work and the study of any novelized genre must be, by definition, a sociological or historical study. It must work the border between text and world, because it is the permeability of this border, in the material of language, which defines and distinguishes novelistic discourse:

The internal social dialogism of novelistic discourse requires the

concrete social context of discourse to be exposed, to be revealed as the force that determines its entire stylistic structure, its "form" and its "content," determining it not from without, but from within; for indeed, social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse, in those relating to "content" as well as the "formal" aspects themselves. (300)

In examining Suknaski's special use of language--at the level of the word, at the level of (national) languages, at the level of genre--I will necessarily and freely work this border between text and world. At the level of the word, this border work manifests itself in self/other relations, and specifically, in Suknaski's appropriation of his first word in English, the composition of his "I".

When Julia Suknaski led her children across the stubble to Wood Mountain, Andrew Suknaski did not yet speak English. The family spoke a mixture of Polish and Ukrainian, but mixed together in such a way that Suknaski did not distinguish between the two languages. He learned English when he entered school in Wood Mountain, but he failed grade one because of the difficulty of learning it. Unlike native English speakers, he remembers and has documented his first violent entry into the language. In his account of learning to say "I," Suknaski dramatizes the intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood:

i was the first word she taught me
in grade one at parker's bluff school--
it took me two weeks to get the word
thru my scrambled slavic head
& out of envy and frustration
i beat a roumanian girl with a two-by-four
because she learned *i* first
("Poem for eve/in memoriam" *Bridge* n. pag.)

Up to this point in his life, Suknaski had been pronouncing himself, his "I," by means of the Ukrainian first person pronoun, which can be represented in the Roman alphabet as "Ia" or "Ya" (quoted in Balan, *Identifications* 70). What Suknaski had to get through his "scrambled slavic head" was a seemingly simple reversal of sound. In the Ukrainian word for "I," the "y" is sounded at the beginning of the word ("Ya"). The English "I," on the other hand, sounds the "y" at the end of the word, a sound which might be represented phonetically as "aiy" or "ay." The fact that Suknaski had such difficulty in effecting this reversal dramatizes for us, as it may have for him, the quality of otherness in language. For the five- or six-year-old Suknaski, it may have seemed as if he had to reverse or invert not only the sound but the meaning of his "I" in order to render it in this strangely other language. In his necessary inversion of the (sound of the) signifier, the signified was also inverted. His "I" became "other." Suknaski utters resistance to effecting this inversion in his beating of the "roumanian girl." This violent reaction, or "answering," dramatizes his awareness of the conflict at the heart of self/other and text/world relations. What Suknaski had to learn when he learned English, as we all do when we enter language, was to negotiate otherness, one way or another.

It is perhaps not surprising that this incident was readily available to Suknaski as literary material (this is an early poem). Both his resistance to and dependence upon constituting his "I" in terms of the other has preoccupied him ever since. For him, the composition of "I" is the main problem he has to deal with in every poem,

every utterance. For Suknaski, the English signifier "I" has no *a priori* content. We might say that he cannot "assume" an identity. At the moment represented in the poem, he becomes acutely aware of having to produce it, over and over again, and in every instance. He becomes aware that he can only operationalize himself by means of the other.

As with Suknaski's strangely other "I," so it is with every word the speaker appropriates in composing an utterance. Because the speaker is not Adam, every word resonates with other uses in other utterances. In using a word, the speaker is drawn into dialogic interaction with it. The speaker must take an evaluative stance in relation to it, because usage is necessarily oriented to the way that word has been used in the past, and to the way it may be used in the future in response to the speaker's utterance. When we speak about something, we necessarily speak to the way in which that thing has been spoken about in the past, and we *condition* the way in which it may be spoken about in the future:

The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (Bakhtin, *Novel* 276)

In Wood Mountain, the dialogic otherness adhering to words is further complicated by the environment of polyglossia, the many different languages spoken. This is the "other" who is tellingly identified in Suknaski's poem. The object of his initial violent answer is the "roumanian girl." She is the ready representative of otherness, by ethnicity and by gender, the embodiment of the terrifying but enabling otherness in the language of Wood Mountain. This language, as we have seen, is a heteroglot cacophony of the words, languages and identities of the people who converged on Wood Mountain from all over the world. At the same time that Suknaski had to begin to "compose" himself in the central unifying language of English, he found himself awash in the centrifugal forces of Wood Mountain's polyglossia. In this environment, utterance is always a "word with a sideways glance" (Bakhtin, *Prehistory* 61). Suknaski's use of the language of Wood Mountain is studded with Dakota, Roumanian, Polish, Ukrainian, Chinese, Métis, Serbian and Dutch words, which interanimate and dialogize, or are in dialogue with, each other. Such a co-existing diversity of languages can only be spoken in self-conscious awareness of them as "other" in relation to the language-centre of Wood Mountain, the centralizing and unifying English of this "new world." Suknaski usually renders the words of these many languages, as well as dialects and accents, phonetically, which gives his work a "low-brow, slapstick quality and marks him as a parodist and tavern bard" (Balan, *Voices* 127). The humour of Suknaski's poetry is often derived from misunderstandings of these words, or it derives from different linguistic and ideological interpretations of words, words whose time and space have various

intersections or axes, or words of different chronotopes. This is what happens in a poem called "Koonohple," a Ukrainian word Julia Suknaski uses to describe a kind of hemp to make rope:

smiling i ask my mother
 "you know what koonohple are mom?"
 i tell her
 "grass mom 'trava' that's the stuff the kids smoke mom"
 she lifts her braided fingers high above her head
 rolls her eyes heavenward
 and exclaims
 "oooh my God...marryyohnah! dhat's be marryyohnah?"
 (*Ghosts* 71)

The implication of such conditions of polyglossia is that the speakers--in this poem, Suknaski and his mother--become aware of all languages as masks; they are aware that no language can claim to be an "authentic, incontestable face" (Bakhtin, *Novel* 273). Meaning is not and cannot be fixed. It comes unglued, unhinged, and the result in this case is laughter, the physiological response to and expression of the awareness of the relativity of things, of the ground of representability continually shifting beneath the speakers' feet. It is as if words are "released from the shackles of sense, to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and establish unusual relationships among themselves" (*Rabelais* 423).

Suknaski makes good use of Wood Mountain's polyglossia in another poem called "Paska I Khmary" (*Narid* 60). In this poem, the poet has forgotten his Ukrainian to the extent that he is having trouble translating for his mother the name of a linocut which hangs on his wall. It is entitled "The Land Also Rises," which

Suknaski finally translates as "easter bread and clouds." In response to this, and to demonstrate her "understanding," Julia Suknaski makes up a narrative about the image. The central point of her narrative is that the picture "means" that it is now time for her son to dig up her garden for spring planting. If the poet's artistic use of polyglossia is shown to be very skilful in this poem, his mother's manipulation of it, and of him, is even more so, and again, the result is laughter.

Wood Mountain's polyglossia is also what enables Suknaski to see the world from *outside* and *below*. In the poem "The Ghosts Call You Poor" (*Ghosts* 96-7), the poet traces the history and social context which generated the Chinese saying of the title, a saying used by Chinese immigrants. The terms *bak kwei* and *yin chin*⁷ give Suknaski and the reader access to the Chinese coolie's way of viewing the world:

the coolies

familiar names

lee

kwon

ching and hoy

nostalgic men

their lovers abandoned

men victimized by *bak kwei*

"white ghost"

the white man

men who befriended *yin chin*

"the indian"

sharing their degradation

bak kwei...ignorant

of the common truth

we have all suffered

to build this country

*"the ghosts call us
...poor"*

The speakers of *bak kuei* and *yin chin*, the speakers of *paska i khmary* and *koonohple* and of all the other national languages Suhnaski draws upon, are intensely aware of these languages as masks which only relatively correspond to their own notions of self, the self behind the mask. The Chinese immigrants only know themselves as "coolies" in relation to *bak kuei* and *yin chin*. The self who utters these articulations of difference does not coincide with the mask (the outer image) because the one who is behind it is still and always in a state of becoming. These masks are the masks of ethnicity, race and gender, masks which both imprison and ground selves in historical time and social space. Such speakers are intensely aware that these masks form the conditions of their answerability. They position these speakers and therefore partially *condition* what they will say when they speak. The masks condition who these "selves" will answer to, and how. This is the social and historical context which enters Suhnaski's texts when he opens them to the forces of Wood Mountain's polyglossia.

Suhnaski is disarmingly direct about the necessity of opening his texts to the flux of languages and social heteroglossia. Many years after getting the word "I" through his "scrambled slavic head," he addressed a panel discussion on "Ethnicity and Identity: The Question of One's Literary Passport":

I am trying to emphasize that it has always been a struggle for me to actually write a sentence. Writing poetry is an evasion of trying to construct one proper English sentence with punctuation. [Laughter] That's why I write without capitals or commas. The best model for me is Joyce's idea of the stream of consciousness. All the lines run into one another, thus I turned my adversity into an advantage. (quoted in Balan, *Identifications* 70)

The novelized genre which Suknaski develops, and which is the product of these conditions of his answerability, *does* give a new twist to Joyce's famous "Here comes everybody."

Writing as if no word is his own, Suknaski appropriates, or lays his texts open to, the broadest possible range of genres. In addition to the letters, diaries, explorer's accounts, death certificates, and psychiatric reports that I have already mentioned, these genres include dreams, anecdotes, gossip, ethnographic descriptions, bits of liturgies, incantations, proverbs, geological surveys, war stories, newspaper headlines, government correspondence, journalistic reportage, and telegrams. These genres are in turn inserted into the framing genre of everyday speech, which is then inserted into the formal literary genre of poetry. Three examples will demonstrate these increasing levels of complexity in Suknaski's use of genres, from the level of the utterance (the dialogizing word), to the speech genre, to the formal literary genre of poetry. After looking at these examples we will be able to evaluate the effect of this "indeterminacy" of genre on Suknaski's utterance.

As Balan has noted, the genre Suknaski most often uses is that of seemingly idle pub or cafe storytelling, in which the entry or absence of someone, or the weather,

language) each other's worldview.

In "Dreaming of the Northwest Passage," Suknaski draws on the archival genres of explorer's diaries and reports in order to reconstruct the moment and the motivations of "contact" between the Old and New Worlds. This insertion of genres into another context works against their monologizing tendencies, as their juxtaposition allows one to cast light or doubt upon the other. In other words, Suknaski puts them in a new dialogical relationship, which is the way we appropriate all genres, as we have seen. The result is a different kind of utterance than that intended by the original author. First Suknaski inserts an account of "contact" from the report of the 16th century Spanish theologian, Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo:

"indians are not far removed from the state of wild animals
therefore coercive measures must be taken
if they are to be christianized
and taught the uses of systematic labour..."

Immediately following this, an explorer says through the inserted genre of his journal:

*the native showed us the way
the native drew the first map on sand and earth
the northern esquimaux drew in snow
and did with small shale cairns
what contour lines do
to indicate mountains
for scottish and british explorers...
(Ghosts 8)*

This juxtaposition is the ancient Socratic device of *syncrisis* (Bakhtin, *Problems* 110). It has the effect of allowing two views of the inhabitants of the New World to comment on and argue with each other, relativizing both of them. By isolating these particular utterances for his poem, Suknaski's authorial intention is also allowed to refract through these utterances. In this poem, we have seen that Suknaski's intention is to pinpoint historically and socially those identities which are operationalized in such utterances, and who are, as a result, now positioned to answer them: the speaking subjects of the postcolonial world.

Finally, Suknaski's texts intersect with the formal literary genre of poetry, but not only in their claim to be "poems." In the poem about Philip Well's suicide, after we leave Philip Well, drunk and lying on a bench at the back of the dance hall, Suknaski ends his poem with the recontextualized words of Yeats:

well lonelier than judas after the kiss
 (the heart's sorrow like a wheel's iron ring
 tightening around the brain till
 the centre cannot hold
 and the body breaks)
 (Wood 40)

The effect of Suknaski's appropriation of poetic genres is twofold. Wood Mountain's everyday speech genres, languages and identities are removed from their immediate historical and ephemeral context to become something else. They take on new life on another plane, the plane of the text. Philip Well's suicide becomes something worth writing about and remembering. Secondly, the poetic genre in which these genres and

identities find themselves is itself deformed by their presence. By appropriating a poetic genre and filling it with non-poetic language, Suknaski glances sideways at the entire tradition of poetry. The everyday speech of Wood Mountain has the effect of parodying as well as honouring this tradition. It makes visible its constructed nature, and it comments on its claim or pretension to be "pure" or "natural" or "true." Even when it valorizes formal poetic utterance, as here in this borrowing from Yeats, Suknaski's poetry is acutely aware of its own *posited* nature. No matter how respectful the borrowing, how earnest the imitation and echoing of poetic resonances, Suknaski's poetry can never mistake itself for the truth. I suspect that this also irks M. Travis Lane, and any of Suknaski's readers who uphold the purity of poetic language, and who grasp after "the moment immortal."

Paradoxically, the many voices and languages we hear in Suknaski's poetry, and the genres by which we access them, remain themselves at the same time that they constitute Suknaski's utterance in answer to the world in which he finds himself. The integrity of the utterances of others in these poems is productive of transgression. What is critical in the production of transgression is the maintenance of a position of *outsideness*. The border or the threshold must be stepped over but it must not disappear or be effaced. Otherwise, self and other will not be of any *value* to each other; they will not be able to enter into a relation of reciprocal identity, in which their value is produced. The integrity of the defining borders of difference is the ground of an ethical respect for difference. This respect is not a value imposed from on high, or one which we can willfully adopt. Rather, it is absolutely essential and constitutive of

identity and meaning construction. If the border disappears, self and other merge, and two potentially enabling others become lost to each other. It is for this reason that, in asking "who speaks?" and in the construction of identity, Suknaski's critical concern is the constitution not only of an "I" but of a "we." Who will be his other? Where will he locate a transgradient perceptual pole? How can he spatialise the world in a way which maintains the integrity of difference, in order to ensure the ongoing possibility of producing an "I"? This is what Suknaski grapples with in his carefully positioned utterance, and in his putting into play the many voices of Wood Mountain.

Here, however re-contextualized, Yeats speaks for himself, as does de Oviedo, James Lethbridge, Gus Lecaine, Julia Suknaski and the others. Suknaski's poems are to a large extent the people speaking, just as the titles of his poems are most often the names, the "titles" of those who speak. Because Suknaski is positioned--carefully positioned, in every poem, every utterance--*outside* and *below* all of his speakers, he achieves a high degree of transgression in giving them form through their utterances in his poems. The form and value he assigns to them is that of subjects, both perceiving and perceived. Particular ways of viewing the world are constitutive of the utterances of these speakers. These ways of viewing the world are not discounted or lost when they are moved into Suknaski's poems, because ways of viewing the world are precisely what Suknaski needs these speakers for, and they determine the artistic use to which he puts their utterances. Suknaski cannot be said to have *appropriated* these voices and identities, because they do not have an *a priori* existence outside their operationalization in specific historical and social utterances, including their historical

and social appearance in Suknaski's Wood Mountain texts.

Suknaski's work shows the importance of grounding the "appropriation of voice" debate in the extension of conditions of answerability, for all speaking subjects, and all potential speaking subjects, of the postcolonial world. The "appropriation of voice" cannot be opposed effectively on morally coercive grounds, or in the extension of what amounts to property rights to language, which leads to censorship and other anti-social and monologic measures. A poet with Suknaski's positioning in the world knows only too well that such grounds of exclusion from social intercourse will only sooner or later find ways to exclude him. Instead, Suknaski produces a more effective model for countering his own invisibility. His novelized Wood Mountain texts make visible and assign value to a marginalized part of the world, and grant subjective status to a host of potentially-speaking subjects (including myself) who have previously been invisible, but who are now positioned to answer back. In this sense, Suknaski's texts themselves have already extended the conditions of answerability. Just as they have constituted a world--the world of Wood Mountain--they are in dialogic relation to, and very much a constitutive part of, the continually emerging, historical and postcolonial world. Rather than appropriate voices, we can more usefully say that Suknaski "ventriloquates," and that his own intentional themes are refracted through the utterances and identities of his poems. As the author of a novelized genre, he "does not speak in a given language...but he speaks, as it were, *through* language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates" (Bakhtin, *Novel* 299).

But what are these themes which "refract" through Suknaski's special use of language? Suknaski's main theme is, as I have already mentioned, "Who speaks?" Behind this central question is the historical poet and the Suknaski of the poems, who is concerned with constructing an identity for himself. This concern is variously represented as "the search for home" (a ground of representability), and as "the meaning of name" (the need for and mistrust of masks).

Chapter Five

The Ground of Representability

*where i grew up--i claim these things
and this ancestral space to move through and beyond
stapled to the four cardinal directions
this is my right
to chronicle the meaning of these vast plains
in a geography of blood
and failure
making them live...*

- Suknaski⁸

What is the importance of Wood Mountain, as a *place*, for Suknaski and for the speakers he mobilizes in these texts? Is Wood Mountain a passive background, against which these speakers "come alive"? Is it local colour, such as we might find in a tourist brochure of an "exotic" world? Is it a container, into which the poet puts meaning? A convenience for linking disparate material? I pose these questions in order to make visible the relative *invisibility* of space and social spatialisation in literary analysis, without the benefit of a notion like the *chronotope*. Bakhtin gives the name *chronotope* to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (*Chronotope* 84). We inherit an arguably temporally biased conceptualisation of the world from the Enlightenment

(Shields 50). It is this conceptualisation which has the effect of making Suknaski and his world invisible. It was also this conceptualisation in the exploration and development of the west which led to representations of the prairies as "empty," a blank to be filled in or inscribed with the practices, artifacts and discourses of the older, "more civilized" and civilizing world. But just as the forces of colonialism, in spite of themselves, precipitated the "colonial subject" through "contact," by bringing or forcing that subject into an identity of reciprocity, so those same forces implemented colonial lands as the new grounds of representability for the postcolonial subject, and for all subjects of the postcolonial world. (This is the discursive significance of aboriginal land claims.) The fact that Suknaski and his speakers always position themselves or are positioned in relation to Wood Mountain has more significance than indicating the novelization of these texts, just as novelization signifies more than a transgression of the borders of literary genre.

We have already seen that the ground of meaning and identity construction (the ground of value) is the giving of form. This form is necessarily shaped by the boundaries that demarcate it in relation to the context in which that form is perceived. In Suknaski's case, this shaping context is the chronotope of Wood Mountain. Bakhtin stresses the centrality of the chronotope as the ground of representability essential for narrative:

Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins.... It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events.

(*Chronotope 250*)

A text may have several chronotopes. These may interact with, oppose, or envelope each other. In the Wood Mountain texts, we can most usefully isolate two main chronotopes. One is the "agricultural idyll." The chronotope of the idyll is identified by Bakhtin as a pre-novelistic form of great importance in the development of the novel (226). Here, I will use the "ancient matrices" of the idyll in order to locate Suknaski's use of this form, rather than the characteristics it has subsequently acquired within the novel (230). The Wood Mountain idyll is periodically interrupted by another chronotope, which I will call the "borders of simultaneity." In this chronotope, time collapses, and Wood Mountain moves from the centre of the world to the margins, or to a border zone. The tension between these two chronotopes is what gives the Wood Mountain texts their tentativeness and fragility, the sense of a world and a word *posited*, rather than categorically demarcated or asserted. It is also this tension that mediates between these texts and the world to which they answer, the historically emergent postcolonial world.

The everyday chronotope of Wood Mountain, which gives rise to Suknaski's genre of familiar, everyday speech (chronotopes have generic significance), is that of the agricultural idyll. Characteristic of this chronotope is the inseparability of life and events from a "concrete, spatial corner of the world" (Bakhtin, *Chronotope 225*). Time here is cyclical and unchanging, localizing "a sequence of generations...that is potentially without limit" (225). This unity of place is the self-sufficient locus for the entire life process. It "brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave" (225).

I have already alluded to the importance these texts place on how the people of Wood Mountain are related generationally, as one of the indicators of novelization. In that context, I mentioned the repeated appearances of Lee Soparlo, the postmaster and son-in-law of Vasile Tonita. Lee Soparlo is an important coordinate in the Wood Mountain chronotope. A poem called "Lee Soparlo" (dedicated "*to all the soparlos*") is divided into three parts, corresponding to two generations of the Soparlo family (Wood 108-10). The first part is called "lee." The idyllic chronotope here explicitly makes representable the unity of the life process by bringing together childhood and old age, the cradle and the grave:

in my boyhood i remember him as the skilful crossmaker
the cross always made from a four by four painted blue
the shade of billy brown's rodeo shirt⁹
and the black plywood text carefully cut with a fretsaw

in the romanian church steeped in holy incense
the cross was always there among the mourners
and reverend erina praying
near the table heavy with loaves of sweet braided bread
the village children and the hungry froshhog boys and i waited for

in recent years he records names and dates of people's departures
births marriages and deaths in the region
in another old scribbler
he records the years when the homesteaders arrived...

The second section of this poem is called "his father" (that is, Lee Soparlo's father), and the third is called "his brother." In each part, children are represented in relation to old age. "Old Soparlo" was known as "the depression dentist" who "pulled his

children's teeth during the thirties." In the third section of the poem, the poet (from his boyhood perspective) and "the three hungry froshhog boys" (they are always hungry, and there always seems to be braided easter bread nearby) see Lee Soparlo's brother John as a miraculous Christ figure, as they pick beer bottles near his grain elevator and witness his mysterious disappearances and reappearances up and down the elevator shaft. The bringing together and connection of all ages, all generations, makes Wood Mountain a closely-knit world, a world which grounds Suknaski and all of his speakers. The generational links with the space of Wood Mountain make it impossible for these speakers to speak from any other position, from any other world. They are inseparable from this context.

A second disingushing feature of this idyllic chronotope is that it is limited to "only a few of life's basic realities," including love, birth, death, marriage, labour, food, drink and stages of growth (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 225). All of these basic realities are represented not only in this particular poem, but throughout the Wood Mountain texts. In these poems, as in the idyll, these processes of life are not trivial details, or biographical "background," as they may be in other chronotopes. In the idyllic chronotope, these processes are represented as the most important events in life. In "Poem About Three Billy Tonitas" (*Ghosts* 68-9), old Vasile is connected to his nephew Billy, and to his grandson Billy. As he drives his team of horses up Wood Mountain's main street,

...a lone hawk circling the blue sky of vasile's thoughts
will often bisect the white vapour trail of a 747

young nephew billy tonita pilots from vancouver to toronto

later on autumn days
 when study becomes too difficult for vasile's grandson billy still tired from his
 assiniboia paper route the night before
 jet streams high beyond school windows
 may become harnesses pulled by a cloudwhite team
 the whole earth a house...

This is indeed a self-sufficient world, in which the generational links between people constitute its "events," and where the wider world appears only in order to connect the ancestors of Wood Mountain to their most far-flung descendants.

The poem "Șat" is a genealogy of the original Roumanian settlement of the Wood Mountain area (*Ghosts* 65-7). The Roumanian immigrants first settled north of the present site of Wood Mountain because, at the time they arrived, Wood Mountain was still just a Northwest Mounted Police post. As if copying from the "old scribbler" in which Lee Soparlo has recorded "the years when the homesteaders arrived" (an "inserted genre"), Suknaski records this genealogy:

there were seven families that year of 1906
 and their names were:

yordaci adamache
 costantine mehiau
 john stefan
 dragu cojocar
 angil cojocar
 nita cojocar
 john stoian
 george chiro
 badar tonita...

Later in this poem, we hear the reminiscences of Mrs Vasile Tonita (Lee Soparlo's mother-in-law) who, as it turns out, is the daughter of Yordaci Adamache, as Vasile is the son of Badar Tonita. Both are descended from the founding group of families. At the end of this poem, "Šat," the place of the ancestors, and the Roumanian word for "village," is positioned in relation to Wood Mountain:

new year's day 1977 and two miles beyond flintoft
 riding in the warm truck with lee and marie soparlo
 marie the daughter of vasile tonita
 a silence broken when lee points across bright yellow stubble
 above glaring white snow
 "you see that single tree just beyond
 mind
 where the snowfence has fallen...
 just to the right of the tree
 and by the crick in that bit of coulee
 down from the railway track...that's
 where sāt used to be..."

Suknaski's own link to this whole cycle of generations, spatialised in Wood Mountain, is cemented when we find that he himself is Lee Soparlo's second cousin (*Land* 132).

A third distinctive feature of the idyllic chronotope is the common language used to describe nature and the events of human life (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 226). This relationship with nature is present in the Wood Mountain texts most noticeably in the assignment of subjective status to animals or insects ("Grizzly at Night" *Ghosts* 59; "Chaapunka" *Wood* 43; "Soongeedawn" 75), in the necessarily close and dependant relationship between people and animals in ranching country ("Birth of the Bull Calf"

Ghosts 43-4; "Love in the Manger" 90), and in such images as we find in "Dance in the Wood Mountain Community Hall," where two poets become coyotes, stalking a possible poem/pheasant, "both motionless and waiting / for the first sound / of crumpling leaves...." In "Planting Potatoes" (*Ghosts* 81-2), the speaker describes the process of remembering an old friend as being "like the slow slow growth of potatoes / the gathering memory of those cold winter mornings...."

The labour aspect of the agricultural idyll is especially significant in terms of a genre's ability to assimilate historical time, because agricultural labour creates "a *real* link and common bond between the phenomena of nature and the events of human life":

agricultural labor transforms all the events of everyday life, stripping them of that private, petty character obtaining when man is nothing but consumer; what happens rather is that they are turned into essential life *events*. Thus people consume the produce of their own labor; the produce is figurally linked with the productive process, in it--in this produce-- the sun, the earth and the rain are actually present (not merely in some system of metaphorical links). Wine is likewise immersed in the process of its cultivation and production, and drinking it is inseparable from the holidays that are in turn linked to agricultural cycles. Food and drink in the idyll partake of a nature that is social or, more often, family; all *generations* and *age-groups* come together around the table. (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 227)

In my earlier discussion of the familiar, everyday speech genres of Wood Mountain, I noted how it is at the public tables of the cafe or the pub in Wood Mountain that Suknaski finds his particular speech genre for these texts. This is also where he finds the grounds of representability of the agricultural idyll, where the entry or absence of

one of the townspeople, or the weather, or local news, prompts someone to speak. A poem begins "mother enjoying some tea / and remembering how they grew koonohple back in galicia..." ("Koonohple" *Ghosts* 70), or "we smoke white owl cigars / and drink white wine-- / john moneo says..." ("West Central Pub" *Wood* 76). In "Birnie" (*Ghosts* 101-4), six men slowly open their lunch boxes before they settle into a round of stories of accidents with the "powertakeoff" mechanism on farm tractors.

Suknaski's success at constituting this world, at bringing the many speakers together around the public tables of Wood Mountain, is the source of his unquestionable authority to claim "these ancestral spaces." But the Wood Mountain idyll is linked to historical time in that it is known only by its contrast to the cruel "outside" world:

where people are out of contact with each other, egoistically sealed-off from each other, greedily practical; where labor is differentiated and mechanized, where objects are alienated from the labor that produced them. (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 234)

The poem "Birnie" is a good example of both the agricultural idyll, and of how the cruel world impinges on it. The speakers come together to speak in the public time and space of their lunch break. But what they talk *about* is how their labour has marked them, how it has *dismembered bodies*. The "powertakeoff" of a tractor is extremely dangerous. Everyone has a story to tell about someone they know whose body is or was disfigured or mutilated when working around it. This is true in the world as well as in the text:

...there was this woman back home in kendall

...one day

her brother n er husband were diggin post holes inna pasture
 she was wearin an ole denim jacket widda frayed sleeve
 when she took lunch out to them
 anyway before they knew what happened
 she was spinnin round that drive shaft like
 wind
 wrappin a blanket round a clothesline
 they say er husband froze in the tractor seat
 couldn move a finger
 er brother ran up n grabbed a holda the drive shaft
 thinkin he could stop it i guess
 lost a hand clear at the wrist...

On the border of Suknaski's chronotopes, these stories escalate, until the speakers are rolling up their pant legs to show their scars, and trying to out-do one another in grotesque imagery. It is difficult to know whether to laugh or cry at these stories. The ground beneath Suknaski's agricultural idyll is giving way. The speakers are dismembered, and the "agricultural idyll" is dying, or being destroyed.

Suknaski's awareness of this impinges on his form-shaping evaluation of everything and everyone in Wood Mountain. We could even say that this awareness is what is behind Suknaski's valorization of the agricultural idyll. As the poet constructs and reconstructs the village of his origins, as he interrogates it, hears its voices, its languages and stories, honours and buries its dead, as he allows all of this to wash over him and to give him form as "The Wood Mountain Poet,"¹⁰ he is haunted by the awareness that Wood Mountain is dying. There is a death in nearly every poem. Wood Mountain itself is repeatedly referred to as the dying or the

abandoned village. Lee Soparlo "fights the sleep in his aging eyes" (*Wood* 108), and even old Vasile Tonita is "down with asthma again...they say the family's bin called in" (37). It is in no way clear what, if anything, can or will take the "place" of Wood Mountain. Suknaski senses his own complicity in letting it die, or in killing it, as when he seemingly accidentally burns down the Orthodox Church ("Leaving Home Again" *Narid* 61-4). But there is no sense of a postmodern revelling in the new indeterminacy in the world as a result of the decline and death of Wood Mountain. Rather, there are alternately the tones of lament, helplessness, desperation and fear, as the poet once again (and always) struggles to find new bearings or coordinates. "A poem is a sniper ready to assassinate everything worth believing in--or living for."

Suknaski's awareness of the doom which hangs over the Wood Mountain idyll in turn finds a ground of representability in the intervalic chronotope of the "borders of simultaneity," as the poem "Birnie" suggests. It is necessarily an unstable ground (you do not know whether to laugh or cry). By means of this chronotope, Suknaski, always the expatriate, tries not only to represent the new indeterminacy in the world, but to bring a more viable chronotope into being, or at least to make some alternative visible, to give it form and value. The chronotope of the borders of simultaneity everywhere undermines the stability of the Wood Mountain idyll. It is characterised not by the continuity of time, but by the total collapse of time into the present moment. All of time is spatialised in the here and now of Wood Mountain. Instead of conceiving of Wood Mountain as the centre of the world, as in the idyll, this chronotope makes Wood Mountain representable as a marginal space, as the "edge," or

as a border zone.

The collapse of time allows Suknaski to proceed as if all of time is present. He is able to extend his operationalizing dialogism to both the living and the dead. In this process, he expands the space of Wood Mountain to include the edges of life, the margins of death. Wood Mountain is spatialised in such a way that Suknaski opens up a border zone (the only space left, in which all of time is present) to make room for himself and for all the lost, displaced or homeless peoples, such as the Teton Sioux, the Nez Percés, the Métis, and the Chinese and eastern European immigrants. That is, he makes himself available to these "others," to make himself (and these others) visible and available to himself and to themselves. All of these people were consigned to marginal lands and spaces, and it is these lands that now constitute their grounds of representability.

In the Wood Mountain texts, life's events take place on, or are viewed from, the "boundaries of wolves," down back alleys bordering yards, by "the field's edge," along the "edge of Wood Mountain," along the "Montana border," the "west ridge," the "southern boundary," "the edge of burnt thigh's grave," "the cemetery edge," "beyond the snowfence," "the edge of lovenzanna's coulee," and to "the point of turning back," to mention just a few of the defining spaces of this precarious intervalic chronotope. These edges and border spaces give the whole body of work an instability and a tentativeness, a sense of being on the threshold, which is the chronotope of "crisis and break... connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to

change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)" (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 248). In this chronotope, time is "essentially instantaneous...as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time" (248). In the same context in which he articulates his "fourfold dream," Suknaski sheds light on the nature of this "crisis and break." It is bound up with his ambivalence to all borders, especially borders which demarcate his own identity:

Believing my mythic origins and dream time to be twofold, I--through birthright--claim the inalienable right to honour both the aboriginal and white ethnic peoples who were mutually victimized by the white supremacist. The obvious price of this art, built on the sentient wish to never fully empathize with a single people, is a guilt anchored in a deep sense of betrayal. (*Silk* 96)

In another context, Suknaski elaborates on this sense of "betrayal" when he says that his poems deal with

a vaguely divided guilt; guilt for what happened to the Indian (his land taken) imprisoned on his reserve; and guilt because to feel this guilt is a betrayal of what you ethnically are--the son of a homesteader and his wife who must be rightfully honoured in one's mythology. (*Wood* 124)

If we go to these sites of Suknaski's claimed origins, to both the "aboriginals" and the "white ethnic peoples" of Wood Mountain, we find that this same ambivalence toward boundaries obtains in the world and in the texts. The geographical Wood Mountain is only about 50 kilometres from the Canada-U.S. border. This border is variously non-

existent, and drawn with a menacing black line, on the ground of representability. For the aboriginal inhabitants, whose only boundaries were marked by the migrations of game, the Canada-U.S. border was at first an incomprehensible demarcation. Later, it was incorporated by them as "the Medicine Line," with distinct horizons of expectation for well-being (food, horses, safe haven from U.S. "bluecoats" or Canadian "redcoats") obtaining on either side, once "settlement" by Europeans began in earnest near the turn of the century. Still later, when the adoption of aboriginal children by American families (Buffy Sainte Marie being our most famous example), and land claims became contentious issues in the 1960s and 1970s, First Nations people again strategically refused to recognize this border. In a poem called "Nez Percés at Wood Mountain" (*Wood* 55-8), Suknaski recounts the arrival of a band of Nez Percés ("death ambling clothed in rags") at the Wood Mountain Post, after fleeing trumped up charges of cattle rustling in the United States. Over a campfire, White Bird of the Nez Percés tells Sitting Bull, "*i have no country / i have no home and i feel / i have no people*". A poem called "Melvin Greene/Oneida Indian Fighting for a Place to Die" (*Wood* 59-61) juxtaposes the border crossing of the Wood Mountain Sioux ("exercising their aboriginal right / to cross the border freely") with the Toronto deportation hearing of 68-year-old Melvin Greene. Suknaski implores Wood Mountain's James Wounded Horse to come to Greene's defense:

pale ghost...how do we tell this appeal board
that it is not a matter of
being canadian by indian law
or an american by white man's law?

how do we tell them
 that it is a matter of *being*...
 that it is a matter of a law beyond
 all these things...

"The Bitter Word" (Wood 69-70) recounts the consignment of the ancestors of James Wounded Horse, Sitting Bull and the Teton Sioux to an impossible border zone. After the battle of Little Big Horn, there was no going back to the United States. The Canadian government at first tried to "encourage" the Sioux "to return / to their own country / (a rather curious view of a people / whose meaning of country changes with / the migrations of tatanka...."¹¹ The government then magnanimously grants Sitting Bull permission to stay in Canada, but denies him food, provisions and a reserve of land:

...seeing the migrating game
 sitting bull knew the tatanka
 would never return
 though his people dreamed of white tatanka rising
 from the subterranean meadows others fled to
 (hideous shrieks of red river carts grating in
 their ears)

he must have sensed the hunger to follow
 which was exactly what the authorities hoped for
 on both sides of the border

In restoring these perished and forgotten people to the ground of Wood Mountain, Suknaski "transforms a portion of territorial space into a place of historical life...a

corner of the historical world" (Bakhtin, *Bildungsroman* 34). As we saw in the poem "Birnie," bringing Wood Mountain into the historical world is also to expose it to historical processes. In these processes, Wood Mountain, the geographical and historical village, is dying, and Suknaski finds himself with nowhere to stand but on the border of the agricultural idyll and the simultaneity of history.

The "white ethnic" immigrants, specifically those from eastern Europe, brought their borders and mistrust of borders with them to Wood Mountain. Their awareness of the arbitrariness and changeability of borders constitutes their *common* ground of representability with the aboriginal peoples in the "New World." Many of the Roumanians emigrated from the Roumanian province of Bucovina, in the Carpathian Mountains. But, curiously, the "Austrians" and even some of the "Ukrainians" came from the same place. In the local history, They Came to Wood Mountain, as many homesteaders claim to have left homes in "Bucovina, Roumania" as "Bucovina, Austria" (63, 66, 67, 76, 91, 96). Of course they mean the same place, but there are many possible reasons why different people would locate Bucovina in different countries, including the fact that national borders in that part of the world *were* constantly shifting in the death-throes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Some of the people from Bucovina were actually Germans, an unpopular ethnicity in Wood Mountain as elsewhere in Canada from 1914 on. Some of the people claimed Ukrainian lineage, including Suknaski's father, who was born in rural Poland and emigrated from Roumania or Austria. In a mix of German, Polish, Ukrainian, and Serbian people, Roumanians were always rated the lowest, partly because of their

Latin as opposed to Slavic language, and their mistakenly presumed ties through that language to the church of Rome rather than Constantinople. The Roumanians were also considered "gypsies," which is perhaps the ultimate consignment to an impossible border zone, as much in the post-Cold War present as ever. The only ethnic identity "lower" than Roumanian was that of the Turk, the enemy against whom all Europeans could unite, even the Slavs. It is still the most serious of insults in Wood Mountain to call someone a "Turk." The ruins of a stone house on top of a hill north of Wood Mountain are all that is left of the home of the first Roumanian priest in Wood Mountain, Parinti Dionese Necifur. His Saint Peter and Paul Church was built at the bottom of the hill, but the house had to be raised up, it is said, so that Parinti could keep an eye out for marauding Turks.

A poem called "Alexander Czornucha" (*Ghosts* 36-9) carries an epigram by Suknaski's father:

*"when the russians moved into the ukraine
i told my brothers in the carpothians
'all you have left now
are the songs you sing'"*

In this poem, Czornucha, in a shabby hotel room in Dauphin, Manitoba, unfolds his "vast vision of history" for Suknaski. Czornucha's vision is a "correction" of official history. It asserts that social spatialisation is a social framework, tied to identity. Of Stalin's "Russia," Czornucha says

...oh yes...it didn't take them long to russify the ukraine
 and they talk of the black sea
 for us...it was always the 'blue sea'
 and so it will remain
 always...

Later, Suknaski's father reveals the confusing, shifting and finally laughably
conventional nature of the borders of identity. Suknaski arrives home to find him
 living in Assiniboia (near Wood Mountain) after a prolonged stay with his daughter
 and her Asian-Canadian husband in Lethbridge, Alberta:

i knew it was time to leave
 that chinaman and your sister
 they were fools trying to get your mom and me
 together again
 anyway
 why should i die there among those indians in alberta?
 i come back here to die
 it may be all rumanians
 but i know them
 and they're my own people
 ("Finding A Home" *Ghosts* 45-6)

For many of the homesteading immigrants, once settled in Wood Mountain, the
 Canada-U.S. border was an abstraction, irrelevant in everyday life, as it was for the
 Sioux. Farmers and ranchers knew their American just as they knew their Canadian
 neighbours. They recognized the brands on each other's cattle when they strayed, and
 they attended each other's farm equipment and stock sales. Diefenbaker is still known
 around there, not as Saskatchewan's great contribution to Canadian statesmanship, but
 as the "embarrassment" who nearly provoked a war along "the world's longest

undefended border." While this conservative (but very grounded) view still obtains to the present day, in 1976, when Suknaski's Wood Mountain Poems was published, Canadian nationalism was on the rise in Saskatchewan as elsewhere in the country. Ironically, given Suknaski's anxious ambivalence toward borders, the publication of this book and its reception is linked to the articulation of nationalism in the Canadian publishing industry, and within that context, to the recognition of "regionalism" as a force in the construction of the Canadian identity. The Globe & Mail reviewed the book, saying, "If Canada ever needed an argument in defence of the regional writer, Andrew Suknaski is it" (*Ghosts*, back cover). As Suknaski knows, what is hidden on the other side of this "high praise" is the abuse to which publishing subjects "regional" writers, in failing to distribute and promote their books and in failing to take them as seriously as it does "national" writers, such as Margaret Atwood (a Toronto writer) and Alice Munro (a rural southern Ontario writer). However, if not for this momentary consolidation of Canadian identity in the publishing industry in the mid-1970s (in which Margaret Atwood of course played a key role), we would not have Suknaski's texts before us at all.

Meanwhile, back in Wood Mountain, it is clear that the aboriginal peoples and the "white ethnics" are consigned to an impossible border zone, making them invisible. They can only be *accommodated*, represented or glimpsed in the "borders of simultaneity," the chronotope which interrupts the agricultural idyll. In addition to making these identities visible, this intervalic chronotope has the effect of making all chronotopes, the borders of all grounds of representability, visible as *conventions*,

rather than as something that "occurs" in nature. Because time is simultaneous (all of time is present), we glimpse all of geological, protohuman and prehistoric time in the space of Wood Mountain. This is how Suknaski represents time *in* space. His aversion and resistance to boundaries arises from his experience of paradoxically being excluded from the world he was born into, the world of Wood Mountain, which is also the source of the imperative that he reconstitute this world, by demarcating borders in the first place. The implication is that, unable to construct boundaries to demarcate "selves," we face madness and self-destruction, as we merge with our environments and thus become invisible or unavailable to our selves. On the other hand, we are fully dependent on the other (that which is outside our selves). Our transgredient relations with the other are what enable us to construct boundaries. This is the tightrope Suknaski walks in "Betrayal Beginning in Dreams" (*Land* 146-54):

"the vector of dreams / bisecting / a place / where the wind rises / indifferent / while the tightrope walker reaches / halfway...." It is a real, historical tightrope, and a real, historical struggle, as real as Wood Mountain and as real as the appearance of Suknaski's word in the historically emergent postcolonial world. Borders will inevitably exclude Suknaski. For him, the problem is that borders are not metaphors. They are real. He is only too aware that the necessary spatialisation of form itself implies a degree of effacement of difference. It is the dream and the nightmare of the Wood Mountainization of the world:

spatialisation must, to some extent, cross class, ethnic and even "cultural" lines in the form of basic perceptions and orientations to the

world if there is to be the maintenance of a basic sociability between these groups. (Shields 62)

Wood Mountainization is a dream because it provides clear-cut categories of identity, fixed in time and space. It is a nightmare because the identity (the utterance, the chronotope) is fixed to the extent that it cannot account for or coincide with the continual "event of being" and becoming (Bakhtin, *Art* 98). Suknaski risks being fixed as a nobody, carrying identification in Cyrillic script. He risks being fixed as "white trash," as a Polish-Ukrainian "ethnic," as a white man, a liar, an arsonist, a dreamer, or worst of all, as a regional writer. But, by means of the intervalic chronotope, Wood Mountainization is possibly generative of different dreams, dreams which take shape on an entirely new plane. The agricultural idyll, of course, is doomed, but its very materialization here "makes of it an ideal for the future and sees in it above all the basis, a norm, for criticizing the current state of society" (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 231). That is, the very construction of this chronotope, of this particular social spatialisation of a world, points to the constructed nature of our spatialised worlds, of the ways in which we have drawn our boundaries of representation. Every chronotope is just one of many chronotopes, as the borders of simultaneity" in relation to the Wood Mountain idyll makes clear.

Most suggestive of all, the intervalic chronotope of the Wood Mountain texts offers a glimpse of a world without borders, or a world before borders are drawn. The border of simultaneity is the threshold of not only the remembered and the forgotten, but of life and death, truth and falsehood, sanity and insanity (Bakhtin, *Problems* 147).

foreign" and which had to be brought close and "domesticated" (Bakhtin, *Chronotope* 234). At this time of "crisis and break" in history, it is necessary

to find a new relationship to nature, not to the little nature of one's own corner of the world but to the big nature of the great world, to all the phenomena of the solar system, to the wealth excavated from the earth's core, to a variety of geographical locations and continents. In place of the limited idyllic collective, a new collective must be established capable of embracing all humanity. (234)

In this vast project, again, it is the construction of a viable "we" which is crucial, the spatialisation of the world in such a way that the borders of representation allow for optimum transgredient relations in the construction of many viable "I's". This is the question the postcolonial subject, or the speaking subject of the postcolonial world, poses and represents.

But this new ground, this new genre, this new "we," does not yet have a name.

Suknaski will not draw a firm boundary because to do so would be to create, and to have to take responsibility for, the possibility (the likelihood) that this border would only once again exclude him and Wood Mountain. This is how it is that, after successfully constituting the world as Wood Mountain and himself as The Wood Mountain Poet, Suknaski still searches for home, for a viable ground of representability. We can see Suknaski's 1982 instalment in the Wood Mountain series, Montage for an Interstellar Cry, as an attempt to extend the boundaries of representation onto a new, all inclusive plane. This text otherwise seems like something of a "departure" from his agricultural idyll, to say the least. It is in the

dedication to Manitoba poet George Morrisett (a "Ukie-Métis"), that Suknaski makes his first explicit mention of "the tradition of holy fools." It is precisely in and on the body of the holy fool that the struggle between the two chronotopes of Wood Mountain is made visible and available to us, as it is to Suknaski. "[T]he centre of value in spatial form is precisely the outer body" (Bakhtin, *Art* 92). The activity or the process of giving form is "the meeting of *two* movements on the surface of a human being that consolidates or gives body to...axiological boundaries--produces the fire of aesthetic value (much as fire is struck from a flint)" (91). It is to the body of the "holy fool" in Suknaski that we now turn.

Chapter Six

The Masks of the Holy Fool

In which utterance is there ever a face--and not a mask?

-- Bakhtin¹²

It is clear by now that Suknaski's task is to make public the "private" spheres of Wood Mountain. Confronted with a language which is other, and an official world view which does not include him, he needs a way to effect an inversion of value. It is precisely the ancient function of the fool to make public those private spheres which are not talked about, those which are hidden on the other side of things. The fool exposes what is hidden, and calls things by their real names. The fool *embodies* the relativity and heterogeneity of identity, the dependent and posited, rather than given, relations of production between selves and others. The image and stance of the fool is both the condition (the mechanism of production) and the product of Suknaski's special use of language and of the new ground of representability which he posits. But how does the fool find its way to Wood Mountain? If we accept all that we have discovered about Suknaski and his world so far, we see that "The Wood Mountain Poet" is very much one who draws upon and contributes to the great history of genres.

He is a player in the wider, historical world. His utterance constitutes an *answering* to nothing less than the colonial expansion begun during the Renaissance. How does Suknaski make his way onto this grand stage? And how might the necessary utterance, the image and stance of the fool, have become available to him? In answering these questions, we will come to appreciate the persistence of the image of the fool in practices of human representation.

Suknaski is writing autobiographically. I have assumed the ethnographer's mask to be able to incorporate my excess of seeing his biography, to be able to freely work the very permeable borders of Suknaski's texts and his world. But what are the implications of writing autobiography, when the task is to construct an identity for oneself? Who is the enabling other who "co-constructs" this identity? How can Suknaski be *both* author and hero? According to Bakhtin, autobiography is "the most immediate transgredient form in which I can objectify myself and my own life" (Art 151). However, autobiographical value "is the least transgredient to self-consciousness" (151). In other words, in autobiography there is insufficient transgredience (insufficient *outsideness*) between author and hero to produce a whole, finalized image of either. You end up with two others, without the conditions necessary to construct either "self." In order for transgredience to be produced, there have to be *two movements* on the centre of spatial form (the outer body): the movement from self to other, in order to see with the other's eyes, and the return movement, from other back to self, in order to consummate the other as a *whole*. The latter is what Bakhtin calls the "answering movement" and it is in this answering that

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the self is able to "create something new, something *excessive*" based on the self's new excess of seeing (91).

To solve this problem of a lack of a transgredient perceptual pole by which to *envision* himself, Suknaski produces, reproduces, or mobilizes other heroes, characters or speakers. But because he is, in the moment of his utterance, the moment of writing the poem, still a single, unfinalizable author/self, he takes the stance and image of the fool, the border-crossing figure of both/and logic, the stance of the *radically other* identity, to be able to bring his speakers into reciprocal relations of identity with themselves and with himself. I use the term *radical* to refer to the inherently unstable and shifting identity of this impossibly-positioned identity (in space, in time). We might be tempted to say that Suknaski's need for such a radical other precedes his adoption of the image of the fool, as we have seen that Suknaski finds himself positioned *in the body of* the always-disappearing-other as he tries to find his bearings and compose his utterance in this New World. But, in fact, the heterogeneous and subtle form of the fool was available to Suknaski through generic contacts in literature, in narrative, and even in the fragmented, discontinuous narrative of his own biography. Suknaski's choice or imperative of becoming an answering author--an author who could not write one proper sentence in English--may more usefully be seen as following from his discovery of the possibilities of the fool for objectivizing this form of identity, for making it *literal*, for operationalizing it and, in the process, operationalizing himself.

In Bakhtin's conception of *historical poetics*, individual authors need not

borrow and proceed "directly and consciously" from previous utterances or genres. Rather, genres themselves are repositories of images. Like all utterances, genres "answer to" the past, and "speak to" the future. "[T]he higher a genre develops and the more complex its form, the better and more fully it remembers its past" (*Problems* 121). Bakhtin speaks of a writer's "generic contacts," pointing out in his study of Dostoevsky that "it was not Dostoevsky's subjective memory, but the objective memory of the very genre in which he worked" that preserved the peculiar features of the ancient genres Dostoevsky drew upon (121). We can trace the image of the fool with some certainty in Suknaski's first literature¹³. This includes Slavic folk tales and the Bible, especially the Gospels, which his mother told to him "four or five" times over, before he went to school in Wood Mountain and learned English.¹⁴ The paradoxical both/and logic and workings of the image of the fool are familiar, then, in the crowning and uncrowning of the "King of the Jews," in the encounters between the tempted and the tempter, the believer and the non-believer, the righteous man and the sinner, the beggar and the rich man, the apostle and the heathen (Bakhtin, *Problems* 135).

Suknaski does not anywhere directly reproduce the Slavic folk tales *as themselves*, although the poems draw on their images. For example, there is a vignette of a drunken Carpathian bridegroom and his brother, who throw the bride to the wolves in "Betrayal Beginning in Dreams" (*Land* 148). The prophetic dream of Julia Suknaski's grandfather in "Three Coffins Dream (Circa 1850)" retains the form of the folk tale or fable (*Ghosts* 75-6). As if to verify the integrity of Suknaski's sources,

Julia Suknaski herself is preserved recounting this "true story" in the Spak/NFB film Wood Mountain Poems. And, again, in the same context in which he articulates his fourfold dream, Suknaski cites his "mythic mainsprings" as a double encoding of "a Slavic pantheism" and "the white Anglo-Saxon/Judeo-Christian cosmology" (*Silk* 96). His mother's particular Christian view, despite her Polish ethnicity, was that of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This means that in her "reading" of both the Bible and the folk tales, she had access to and passed on "generic contacts" with the important image and tradition of the "holy fool" in the Eastern Church, which in turn derives from pre-Christian Slavic traditions (Fedotov II:317).

In the Eastern Church, the "Holy Fool" is actually an order of canonized saints. This order was discontinued in the seventeenth century, but it outlived official disapproval and persisted in low cultural forms, even becoming incorporated into socialist realist forms of representation after the Bolshevik revolution of this century (Billington 538). This persistence can be partly explained by the uninterrupted trajectory of Slavic Christianity:

Russia did not know either the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation with their cleansing, spiritualizing, and sweeping out of medieval superstitions...The Russian peasant had been living in the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century.... (Fedotov I:3)

Two traits of the Holy Fool are of particular relevance to a discussion of Suknaski. The most common official explanation of the fools is that they dramatize the struggle against pride. The Holy Fool revels in a feigned madness¹⁵ with the aim

of provoking vilification in sinners. If it works, the sinner's behavior is modified, and a soul is saved. But, as Fedotov notes,

the act of saving souls provokes gratitude and veneration, which nullifies the ascetic motive of the foolishness. That is why the life of a holy fool is a perpetual oscillation between moral acts of saving men and immoral acts of insulting them. (II:320)

What is relevant here is the "perpetual oscillation" of the Holy Fool, which correlates with the necessary instability and unfixed positioning of Suknaski's image of *radical alterity* in the fool. If the Holy Fool was praised and venerated for saving souls, he would lose his effectiveness (as otherworldly and as other). The Holy Fool played a role that the priests and the hierarchy of the Church could not play without giving up their (worldly) authoritative positioning. This positioning is precisely what the Holy Fool resists, and why the image of the fool is still with us, in the Wood Mountain texts, as elsewhere. The fool is extremely complex, striving to encompass and maintain within itself both poles of becoming (Bakhtin, *Problems* 176). The fool is "in life but not of it," which is Bakhtin's view of "the author" in relation to text. The fool is "life's perpetual spy and reflector" (*Chronotope* 161).

A second trait important for a reading of Suknaski is the foreign origins of the Holy Fool in the Slavic tradition. This is "the expression of their strangeness to the surrounding life, of their wanderer status on the earth. The repudiation of one's mother country is an ascetic virtue particularly connected with *foolishness for Christ's sake*" (Fedotov II:327). This is Suknaski's insistence on "the transient meaning of

home." This is the Holy Fool in Suknaski, who insists on his ethnicity, on his origins, and who persists in his search for home, and for yet "more primal" origins, but who wishes "to never fully empathize with a single people" (*Silk* 96). This is the Suknaski who so thoroughly demarcates his boundaries, only to escape or elude or deny them, unable or unwilling to coincide with any of the conventional life-slots of identity available to him, rejecting conformity with any mask. In these images of the fool, Suknaski is "outside all hierarchies, for a hierarchy can determine only that which represents stable, immovable and unchangeable being, not free becoming" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 364). Suknaski's radically other Holy Fool is, therefore, the stance and the guarantor of freedom, freedom *in* identity and freedom *from* identity.

What defines the fool as not *of* life, as outside all hierarchies, is his insistence on the condition of life as unfinalized and openended, as free becoming. What positions the fool *in* life, as a possible human/authorial stance with (relatively) stable coordinates--in other words, what enables the fool to take on form, to be represented spatially--is his link, as a carnivalesque form, to the cycle of the seasons, and through that, to the only possible fixed coordinates in the absolute relativity of time, those of individual birth and death. In Suknaski, what needs to be "made public" is precisely the conditions of his "appearance," his birth, and therefore his identity.¹⁶ This ties Suknaski to the reconstruction of the narrative of his parents. Suknaski's fool carries with him into the Wood Mountain texts the most persistent and important form of carnival in Slavic culture, that of the "cult of the dead," or the *rod*¹⁷, in which "the double mystery of birth and death is experienced as well in the life of the *rod* as in

the yearly cycle of the earth":

From the sperm of the parents man is brought forth into the everlasting *rod* for his short existence, just as the seed, buried in the earth's womb, gives a new life to the ear of corn which is procreated through the death of the seed itself. (Fedotov I:18-19)

Such an earthly cosmology considers "the individual only as *a transient moment in the eternal life of the rod*" [emphasis added] (19). In this, too, is Suknaski's "transient meaning of home."

As late as 1946, Fedotov wrote of the persistence of the "cult of the dead" in the Slavic appropriation of Christianity:

In modern Russia the commemoration of the dead occupies a prominent place in the liturgical worship of the Church. No less than ten Saturdays in the year--so-called "Parents' Saturdays"--are consecrated to prayer for the dead. Even the liturgical service preserved the traces of the pagan funeral banquet, at which the dead were believed to participate in the meal with the living....[This] is a spring feast of the dead (*Radunitsa*), coinciding with the Easter week which has preserved most faithfully the character of the pagan Slavic *Trizna*, or funeral banquet.... (I:16-17)

This carnival tradition places great emphasis on kinship ties, which Fedotov identifies as "the deepest religious root of Russian collectivism" (19). It also accounts for the complicated system of personal patronymic names, in which kinship relations are preserved in detail, and the use of kinship names in addressing strangers, as titles of civility:

In this procedure all social life is shaped as the extension of family life and all moral relations among men are raised to the level of blood kinship. (I:16)

Suknaski's preoccupation with names and naming, with working out kinship links (is he *really* Lee Soparlo's second cousin, linking him to the original Roumanian Săt?), and the striking recurrence of spring and easter images (braided easter bread, the cross, resurrection), and with images of seeds and planting time in all of his poems about his parents and other kinship links, speaks to and resonates with this cult of the dead.

Suknaski nearly always returns to Wood Mountain in the spring. His mother seems always to be planting seeds, baking easter bread or painting *pysanky* (easter eggs). He never leaves Wood Mountain but with a loaf of braided bread under his arm. Even after his "foolishness" of burning down the Church, his mother foists bread on him:

tek dhis loh f easterr b bread
myte you be get hahgrry
vehrr you goink
("Leaving Home Again" *Narid* 61-4)

These images of spring, of the cycle of the seasons, of Suknaski's departures and returnings to the place of the ancestors, are productive of transgression. They are the sign of the holy fool, of an imminent inversion of value about to take place in the Wood Mountain texts. Suknaski's life (his texts) and his *rod* are about to be assigned a valued and central place in the world. It is in these images that the poems find their place to begin, their "entry into the possible." A poem begins "for the third spring in a row / i return..." ("Homestead, 1914" *Wood* 19-26), or "it was spring / and

i was home again...". ("Dance in the Wood Mountain Community Hall" *Ghosts* 1-3). This is how, finally, the Holy Fool finds its way into Suknaski's novelized texts to solve the problem of the author's or the narrator's *positioning* in relation to the narrative material. This is the answering movement of the speaking subject in the postcolonial world.

A poem called "Now It All Begins Like This" (*Narid* 95-7) so densely exemplifies all I have thus far discussed in Suknaski's work that, by way of conclusion, I will adopt a variation of Roland Barthes's *S/Z* format in order to deal with part of it, slowing down the action by breaking the poem into manageable "lexias." I will forego Barthes's five codes in favour of the Bakhtinian categories we have already found so useful, namely, the speech genres, the chronotopes, and the form of the holy fool. Here is the opening of this poem:

NOW IT ALL BEGINS LIKE THIS

mostly one lee soparlo speaking

now it all begins like this in primal meaning of name
 suknatskyj namesake listener on margins
 of lineage hero yearning to make it true
 suknatskyj carder and weaver of carpathian wool
 to clothe comrade in war
 suknatskyj who questions the very earth others stand on
 calling it theirs that place
 mantling his parents in a single season
 there is the whitehooded priest confirming fears
 "maybe you're right out at the end of the plank,
 all over again, without a fixed voice again..."
 and there is *mahzahkahzah* clown turning agony
 into absolving joke
 "hey man that soparlo he was king man

back in yer village that man man
 he became yer memory you've had yer say man
 give im back iz hills you kin live somewhere else now..."
 that man whose perfect roman profile assumes the shadow
 vectoring towards the bar's clock indicating
 three minutes to closing time when he says
 "now it all begins like this..."

(Title): *NOW IT ALL BEGINS LIKE THIS* * Colloquial speech, raising the question of "who speaks?" Who is presuming to know how "it all begins"?

mostly one lee soparlo speaking * Answering the question, "who speaks?" "Mostly" indicating a somewhat "complex and tangled conflict of the speaker and the listener" (Volosinov, *Discourse* 113). (Does not Suknaski "sign" the poem?)

now it all begins like this * The genre of everyday speech of the idyllic chronotope, the genre of storytelling; Soparlo's words, brought into the high literary form of poetry, make him the first Fool. His words parody the epics of genesis, the stories of how it all began. ** Positioning, finding the beginning, in the flow of social heteroglossia, in all the words that flows through the Wood Mountain pub on any given night, in the social markers of the utterance (itself a response, and in anticipation of a reply). Where to begin? "Now it all begins like this...."

in the primal meaning of name * Signifying, as always in Suknaski, the need for and mistrust of masks, here "disguised" as a search for a name (a face, an identity) which

precedes all others, as if underneath all the masks, he might find something "primal," original, grounded. The problem of where to begin, of where to locate the original, as always, is the problem of the poem. So far, Suknaski has not located it. There is no identity which coincides, which can fix the world or himself. "Now it all begins like this" is hopeful, but as we know, "a poem is a sniper...." Here Suknaski looks the sniper in the face, and in fact, this poem turns out to be the story of Lee Soparlo as sniper. Suknaski sees his own mask, that of "The Wood Mountain Poet," and underneath this mask is (the mask of) Lee Soparlo, his memory. "Now it all begins like this..."

suknatskyj namesake * Namesake, one who is named after or has the same name as another; Suknaski carries the same name as his father, here reverting to the old spelling, the previous, Ukrainian, and perhaps "primal" spelling (meaning) of the name, which was effaced, anglicized, in the New World.

listener on margins * Someone who is named after or who has the same name as Suknaski (that is, a masked identity which does not necessarily coincide with the poet/author) is presented, *positioned* as Lee Soparlo's *listener* (his addressee), and not only that, this listener is positioned *on margins*...

of lineage * Margins of lineage; we know that Lee Soparlo and Suknaski are second cousins, a marginal relationship, likely through marriage, but enough for Suknaski to

lay claim to be Soparlo's addressee, his listener. The fact that Suknaski must go to such lengths to establish this link, to establish his positioning as *listener* indicates that this link is not taken for granted. It is a tenuous link, almost as if he is an eavesdropper, a stealer of words, a thief. ** The "margins of lineage" does not have the centrality of the generational links of the idyllic Wood Mountain chronotope. Here, the intervalic "borders of simultaneity" disrupt the idyll in the *appearance* (the giving of form) of Suknaski ("*suknatskyj namesake listener on margins*") in his own poem, *on margins of lineage*. *** *listener on margins of lineage* now leads us to Suknaski's biological and fixed lineage, or coordinates.

hero * By activating Lee Soparlo (who is memory) as speaker, Suknaski becomes the hero of his own poem: the hero as listener, as addressee. He becomes visible to himself, in the "answering movement." He is consummated as a whole, a closed and finished identity. It turns out he is a poet who relies on the memory and the word of others, specifically here the word of "one lee soparlo."

yearning to make it true * Yearning for such a fixed name (that of the hero) in the fixed Wood Mountain idyll (idol?). The "yearning" signaling its posited rather than given nature. The truth, as always, is *posited*.

suknatskyj * Repetition of the name, the "meaning of name." A meditation.

carder and weaver of carpathian wool * The name means a craftsperson, one who gives form to useful items, made or fashioned out of *indigenous materials*.

to clothe comrade in war * The name constitutes protective clothing, armour, necessary in conflict, especially conflicts about *territory* (war).

suknatskyj * Repetition of the name, the meaning of name, the genre of incantation, here for the meaning of the name to present itself.

who questions the very earth others stand on * Now Suknaski is the Fool. The name, the mask, the identity which has no place to stand, no territory, because its "mask," identity or utterance is that which questions and therefore undermines the very notion of territory (of identity). The only thing beneath this mask is the imperative of "maskness." ** In which utterance is there ever a face--and not a mask?

calling it theirs that place * Ownership, territory, identity, is posited, not given; the Carpathians, Wood Mountain, the name. They call it theirs, but that is only what they *call* it, what they name it...

mantling his parents in a single season * "mantle" 1. Anything that clothes, envelopes, conceals. The mantle of identity, territory. Protective armour for the battle, the war (of selves and others). 2. A sheath of clay laid over a wax model,

forming a mold when the wax is melted out. A mold for making forms. Identity molded, fixed. Suknaski "mantled" by the identities of the parents, the ancestors, fixed in time and space. How can he pretend to be anyone else? Yet how can he be their son? How can he occupy the category as given, yet still remain in a state of free becoming? ("After they made Suknaski, they threw away the mold.") ** This all takes place, or rather, "it all begins," in a single season, the season of the cycle of birth, growth, death. *** *mantled in a single season* Suknaski's parents die within months of each other, 1978.

there is the whitehooded priest * The worldly other of the Holy Fool, the highest clergy of the Eastern Church, wears white vestments, including, in the Slavic Church, a white veil (Attwater I:42-3); despite this, he is ineffective at saving souls, as he must be venerated for it. He is the official world and world view, the other side of the Holy Fool, the "other" who makes visible the Fool and enables the Fool's transgradient perceptual pole (the view from *outside* and *below*). ** On the borders of simultaneity, "everything lives on the very border of its opposite." The white hood is also the sign of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist. Another kind of holy man, hidden on the other side of things.

confirming fears * The whitehooded priest confirms the identity of the supplicant, the victim, or the addressee (in this case, Suknaski) as *other*. ** The whitehooded priest confirms the fears which the other *shares*. They have the same fear. The fear that

Identity is, after all, only a mask. A necessary mask, but one that can fix as well as hide you. It can make you a target. It can be the death of you, just as it can hide and protect you, in destroying *others*.

*'maybe you're right out at the end of the plank,
all over again, without a fixed voice again...'* * Who speaks? Which voice? From what position? From the end of a plank? From the altar (the site of the sacrifice)? The site of the give-and-take of selves and others? The circle of burning crosses? ** The vertigo of the borders of simultaneity.... Walking the plank: a test of courage, a means of settling disputes, of punishing drunken sailors, and exposing them to ridicule, of making *fools* of them...

and there is mahzahkahzah * Enter the Holy Fool, *Mahzahkahzah*, striving to encompass "both poles of becoming," as both priest and victim (he who offers and he who is offered). ** *Mahzahkahzah*, the foolish yet wise-sounding name of a recurrent twin mask/voice in Suknaski's utterance, especially in Montage for an Interstellar Cry. From this textual evidence, and from my ethnographic excess of knowing, I can tell you that this mask most often coincides with the historical poet George Morrisett. Perhaps the meaning of the name *mahzahkahzah* is from Morrisett's Métis heritage, the heritage, lineage, identity he thought he had, to the extent that he became a "Métis fiddler." Morrisett flourished in his Métis-ness, until his "parents" told him he was adopted. Years of tortured searching (for the meaning

of name) turned up a Ukrainian heritage, one which abandoned him in infancy.

Morrissett recounts this discovery in his book, Finding Mom at Eaton's, where he admits:

At the time, I was a little disappointed,
frankly, that I wasn't Jewish...
(30)

Maybe *mahzahkahzch* is the name of a Hebrew prophet...

clown turning agony * Here it is: the inversionary moment.

into an absolving joke * To absolve is "to set free from obligation or penalty," as opposed to acquit, which is "to set free from accusation." "The innocent are rightfully acquitted; the guilty may be mercifully absolved." If Suknaski is guilty of having no fixed voice, *mahzahkahzah* frees him from subsequent obligation and penalty.

'hey man that soparlo he was king man
back in yer village that man man
he became yer memory you've had yer say man
give im back iz hills you kin live somewhere else now...'

* Soparlo is king to Suknaski's fool, speaker and listener, identity a give-and-take among speakers and listeners. Soparlo is anchored in the Wood Mountain idyll; he is

the continuity of time, the guarantor of a ground of representability, meaning and identity for Suknaski. Soparlo displaces Suknaski ("give im back iz hills"), but where will Suknaski go, now that he is free, or *absolved*? "A poem is a sniper..." ** "The fool is to be found on the periphery of the artistic" (*this poem, in which mostly one lee soparlo speaks, has not yet begun; it still searches for a place to begin...*). The fool is determined "by an extremely complex and tangled conflict of the speaker with the listener" (Volosinov, *Discourse* 113). I employ Barthes's *structuration* in order to disentangle this very conflict.

that man whose perfect roman profile * Lee Soparlo, descendant of the founding Roumanian families of Săt. chronicler of births, marriages, deaths. Lee Soparlo, cartographer of the only fixed coordinates, and centre of gravity of the Wood Mountain idyllic chronotope...

assumes the shadow
vectoring towards the bar's clock * Time's shadow bears down on Lee Soparlo, the centred and centering storyteller in the public space of the Wood Mountain pub, not the unchanging and cyclical time of the Wood Mountain idyll, the time in which endless stories are told and re-told (the time which is about to be disrupted), but the borders of simultaneity...

indicating
three minutes to closing time when he says
'now it all begins like this...' * The intervalic chronotope of "crisis and break" is the

only time and space available for Soparlo to tell his story. He has just three minutes to tell what promises to be a long and detailed story, the story of "it all," of everything, of the genesis, the story of how it all begins, in just three minutes. In three minutes, it will be closing time. The public space (the pub, the place of telling such interminable, timeless stories) is closing, just as Soparlo begins...

As it turns out, "Now It All Begins Like This" is Lee Soparlo's story of rifle training, inspection and target practice in World War II. This is the genre of old war stories, of a soldier and his trusty gun, a genre particularly tied to and arising from the everyday speech genres of the Wood Mountain idyll. This genre constitutes an "event" of the Wood Mountain chronotope. It is its own justification, opening a space or presenting the pretext for talk, for negotiating otherness (just as aiming a rifle at the head of another human being, at the target of identity, is another way of negotiating otherness. A poem is a sniper...). But time has now collapsed to the extent that Soparlo must tell this whole long detailed story in a breathtaking three minutes. Miraculously, he does it, the three minutes becoming that eternity of the split second, in which life and death decisions are made and triggers pulled, or not. Soparlo trailing off just in time to give way to the always sobering and grounding speech genre of pubs at closing time: "OKAY PEOPLE! CLOSIN TIME / DRINK UP! LET'S ALL GO HOME / CLOSIN TIME..." This is a boundary (the marker of the end of an utterance), the ambiguous time and space of the change, from day to night, from opening to closing time. And on this boundary we return to the bare-faced words of

the poet:

and when the lights are out
there is still the needling question of that man who became
memory he still telling you stories
their power prevailing to change you
when already acolytes to the mercurial word
urge you to move on wary of
unwavering faith in language choosing you
while voices bear gifts for the worthy
betrayers knowing his lot
there is still the nuzzling question of earth
you stand on claim
but you know you must move on
shouldering into strong wind at night
where you light no more than two matches
per cigarette
taking heed among friends
and lighting no more than two cigarettes
with one match
the flame the eternal ghost gun uses
to draw a bead...

"A poem is a sniper..." whose bullet will strike whoever is fool enough to become the
fixed target, fool enough to expose and identify the self, by taking the third light....

Notes

1. I take the phrase "how words hook onto the world" from Linda Hutcheon's A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York: Routledge, 1988) 156.
2. Bakhtin's authorship of three texts I draw upon is disputed by some scholars. The texts include Marxism and the Philosophy of Language and "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art (Concerning Sociological Poetics)," originally published as the work of V.N. Volosinov; and The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics, originally published as the work of P.N. Medvedev. The edition I use of the latter text now includes Bakhtin's name on the title page. I cite this text in Bakhtin's name for ease of reference. I cite the Volosinov texts in Volosinov's name, but I do consider them to be part of the Bakhtin corpus. In any event, the ideas and formulations I draw upon from the disputed texts are consonant with those in works of Bakhtin's undisputed authorship. All scholars agree that, at the very least, Bakhtin had a great influence on the work of both Volosinov and Medvedev.
3. I will argue that the "Wood Mountainization of the world" means all of Suknaski's work may be included in such a designation. I do not deal exhaustively with any single poem or text but instead attempt to trace the *productive process* of Suknaski's poetic utterance. I do, however, draw my evidence primarily from the following major texts: Wood Mountain Poems (1976), On First Looking Down from Lion's Gate Bridge (1976), The Ghosts Call You Poor (1978), In the Name of Narid (1981), Montage for an Interstellar Cry (1982), The Land They Gave Away (1982), and Silk Trail (1985).
4. Former postmaster of Wood Mountain, quoted in Harvey Spak, dir., Wood Mountain Poems (National Film Board of Canada, 1978).
5. A homesteader "proved up" by cultivating a certain number of acres within three years of receiving his land grant. On "proving up," he was given title to the land.
6. From Suknaski's "Statement" in Storm Warning. Al Purdy ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971) 134.

7. The reader needs to mark these words, as they reappear without explanation in other texts and other contexts, another indicator of Suknaski's novelized utterance.
8. "Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture"(Wood 78-81).
9. We know that Billy Brown's rodeo shirt is "a shade lighter than the autumn sky beyond yellow poplars" from its appearance in a previous poem, "Billy Brown" (Wood 91).
10. The name by which Suknaski is known locally.
11. "Tatanka" is "buffalo" in Dakota.
12. Quoted in Holquist, *Bakhtin* 170.
13. The image of the trickster/fool was available to Suknaski in the heteroglot and polyglot languages and in the speech genres of Wood Mountain, as many of the poems attest. Suknaski also draws on Russian literature (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Mayakovsky), which in turn draws upon this image and makes it available to all who read these authors. In addition, Suknaski drew on historical ethnography, such as Billington's The Icon and the Axe, which he formally cites in Montage for an Interstellar Cry. Here, I trace only the most direct and useful (for my purposes) generic contacts with Eastern Orthodox Christianity.
14. Quoted in Harvey Spak, dir., Wood Mountain Poems.
15. Fedotov notes that "*real* madness or foolishness or a mental deficiency is no obstacle for Christian holiness... The Church, when canonizing a holy fool, always presumes the mask, the disguise...." (II:323-4)
16. Death, particularly by suicide, is an important theme in the Wood Mountain texts. This theme is related to Suknaski's preoccupation with locating his coordinates. Here I deal with this only by implication.
17. *Rod* is the Russian word for kin, tribe, or clan. The Ukrainian, which Suknaski uses, is *rid*, as in *Narid*.

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