

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Summer 1983

Western Myth And Northern History The Plains Indians Of Berger And Wiebe

Sherrill E. Grace

University of British Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Grace, Sherrill E., "Western Myth And Northern History The Plains Indians Of Berger And Wiebe" (1983). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1717.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1717>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

WESTERN MYTH AND NORTHERN HISTORY

THE PLAINS INDIANS OF BERGER AND WIEBE

SHERRILL E. GRACE

We have used up the mythological space of the West along with its native inhabitants, and there are no new places for which we can light out ahead of the rest. . . . [But] we have defined the "territory ahead" for too long in terms of mythologies created out of our meeting with and response to the Indians to abandon them without a struggle.

Fiedler, *The Return of the
Vanishing American*

I want to fashion good words forever,
stretch my body into a continuous sentence,
humiliate the air with speech, break
the chronology of my people's despair,
sew them green stories, chronicles of hope,
weave a new history from our
twin beginnings.

Gutteridge, *Tecumseh*

Sherrill E. Grace is associate professor of English at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of several articles and books on modern literature, including Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood (1980) and The Voyage That Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction (1982).

During the past forty years, North American interest in the native peoples of this continent has increased and gone through some significant changes. Numerous white Canadian and American writers and film makers have attempted new portrayals of the Indian and of the relation between the white and red races, and many have tried to revise or reevaluate the history of this relationship, especially from the Indian point of view. Although the styles, purposes, and emphases vary widely, general distinctions can be made, not only between fiction and film and between American and Canadian approaches, but among the various types of novels and films.¹ Comparisons between film and fiction and between different approaches to the Indian by contemporary white novelists are beyond the scope of this discussion. It is the so-called historical novel of the West that I am concerned with here, specifically, Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) and Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973). Because Indians and history have meant different things for Canadians and Americans, the question of national and cultural distinctions must also be explored.

In *The Return of the Vanishing American* Leslie Fiedler argues that the heart of the

"Western" novel is not the land per se, but the Indian; "The Western story," he writes, "is a fiction dealing with the confrontation in the wilderness of a transplanted WASP and a radically alien other, an Indian."² Thus far his point is a good one, but what he goes on to say exposes the need to refine some national distinctions. Fiedler continues with the assertion that the confrontation between white and red races results in the elimination of "one of the mythological partners"—either the Indian is annihilated or the WASP metamorphoses into something indeterminate. But while this either/or paradigm of right/wrong. Them/Us, illuminates American Westerns very well, it is less helpful with Canadian novels about Indians and the West. My argument is that Berger has written a Western and Wiebe a "Northern," and that indeed Canadians write Northern novels especially when they are writing about Indians and the West.

Any viable literary comparison must be built upon a shared context and a common ground of significant similarity. *Little Big Man* and *The Temptations of Big Bear* are sufficiently close in date of composition and accepted literary stature to invite comparison. More important, they both use historical facts and dates to recreate a crucial period in the history of relations between whites and Indians (roughly, from 1864 to 1885) at the time when Canada and the United States were opening up the prairies and plains to settlement and railways. Moreover, these novels share a number of specifically literary features: both focus upon a wise, old Indian chief; both employ the figure of the Indian woman (Sunshine and Sits Green on the Earth) who teaches the white man how to *be*; both present the Indian way of life—its hunts, visions, dreams, and values—sympathetically and accurately; and both end tragically in death. To a certain degree (though this is less the case with *Little Big Man*), both are novels of historical revisionism that choose the stereotypic bad Indians—fighting Cheyennes and stubborn Crees—as suitable subjects for rediscovery, and again to varying degrees, both novels speak to contemporary white readers

about the moral and cultural identity of the "other." Both novels can be seen as captivity narratives, but a consideration of who holds whom captive and the literary treatment of the captivity involves the question of difference, and it is the striking differences in these two similar novels that bear witness to the individual concerns of Berger and Wiebe, to the assumptions and biases of their respective traditions, and to the different ideologies of their countries.

Despite the historical accuracy of *Little Big Man* and *The Temptations of Big Bear*, anyone familiar with the texts will sense the differences in attitudes toward historical document and fact revealed by Berger's and Wiebe's fiction. Berger has said that he read sixty to seventy accounts of the "reality . . . in order to reinforce [his] feeling for the myth."³ He is interested primarily in the myths produced by a literary tradition: the stereotypic characters and extravagant events of the popular romances of the Wild West and of Hickok and Earp, the numerous stories of the sole survivor at Custer's Last Stand, the tall tales of gunslingers and "Injun" killers, the widespread Custer cult, and above all the numerous and once popular captivity narratives. Wiebe, however, in his fascination with photographs and passion for document, takes immense pride in re-creating the story of Big Bear by inventing as little as possible because the names, the letters, and some of the speeches are already there and do not require improvement.⁴ What Wiebe wants is to make Big Bear's tragedy and otherness "real," to show what it was like to be an Indian during the treaty period, and to unearth his story, because "*all* people have history," and it is the history that gives them meaning and life. It is not the heroics of a noble savage that interest Wiebe, but the truth, which can be glimpsed "by setting the diamond of the document in the artificial set of the fictive situation."⁵

Little Big Man is usually described as satire or comic parody, a huge epic and episodic

novel that mocks everything from the conventional western hero (Jack Crabb is short, garrulous, and a coward), to actual historical and literary figures, to the stereotypes of Indians and their camps.⁶ To a great extent this emphasis on satire and comic parody is justified, but it does not answer satisfactorily the problems of tone and interpretation that bedevil critics of the novel and haunt Arthur Penn's film. In assessing Crabb and his story, it is essential to remember the pompous Fielding-esque editor, Ralph Fielding Snell, whose framing commentary provides an important reminder of the literary and conventional context of story and novel. In other words, to appreciate *Little Big Man*, readers must remember that it is a story within a story and they must be familiar with the myths and conventions it builds on, frequently mocks, but finally adds to, for *Little Big Man* is more than parody, if by parody we mean mere comic imitation. The novel is serious literary parody, by turns comic, satiric, and tragic, that rises from and consciously perpetuates the literary forms (including history) and cultural assumptions of the western mythos. *Little Big Man* is invention, a twentieth-century captivity narrative that explores all the white psychological taboos and fears basic to the early captivity narratives while at the same time exploiting the ritual and mythic pattern of all such narratives. Its considerable power and success proves, not that white readers suddenly recognize their abuse of the actual or the pretend Indians, but that the ritual and romance of the captivity experience and its consequences for the captive continue to hold the imagination.

The Temptations of Big Bear is neither parodic nor epic, neither mock-heroic nor satiric. It is a serious, at times didactic, novel that attempts, first, to get the reader inside the skin of Big Bear, and second, to present the events from 13 September 1876 to Big Bear's death on 17 January 1888 from as many points of view as possible. As a consequence, *The Temptations of Big Bear* is a polyglot meditation on a situation that, one hundred years later, we still do not understand. In a sense, the novel is

also a realist one: for the most part, Wiebe does not invent his characters or his situations, and he does not invent a narrator; in fact, he discarded an early attempt at the novel using a "Henry Fielding narrator-type."⁷ Instead, he has assembled the documents in order to facilitate their contemplation, and his imaginative act, like the reader's, is less one of invention per se than of identification through contemplation. Big Bear himself is a type of Old Testament prophet or patriarch who must try to lead his captive people through a wilderness of violence, loss, and temptation, but who knows from the start what the end will be. At least in Wiebe's structuring of the story, Big Bear knows from his dreams that he will end, as he began, a captive. Where *Little Big Man* explores and exploits the traditions of the white captivity narrative, *The Temptations of Big Bear* forces us to see the profound irony of the Indian held captive in his native land by an ordinary group of whites who are neither evil nor good, stupid nor wise, but who are themselves held captive by a logic and ideology that they cannot overrule or successfully adapt.

Berger has said that he wept when his Cheyenne chief, Old Lodge Skins, died, but Wiebe felt he had *become* Big Bear, and this difference reflects a fundamental distinction between the two texts in their points of view, as well as in the choices and intentions of the writers.⁸ Apart from the frame, *Little Big Man* is Jack Crabb's story, presented and controlled by his single vision and voice. We see everything through his eyes, and we hear the humor and eloquence of Old Lodge Skins himself through the mediation of Crabb's incredible 111-year-old memory. For example, in recounting the boyhood adventure with Crow Indians that led to his naming, he remembers that Old Lodge Skins

made a speech which from modesty I'll pass up except for the important points.

After recounting my exploit at great length in a poetic fashion that would just sound silly in English, he said: "This boy has proved himself a Human Being. Tonight there is weeping in the Crow lodges. The

earth shakes when he walks. The Crow cry like women when he comes! He is a Human Being! Like the great Little Man, who came to him in a dream and gave him strength to kill the Crow, he walks! . . . This boy's medicine comes from the vision of Little Man. He is himself little in body and he is now a man. But his heart is big. Therefore his name from now on shall be: Little Big Man."

That was it, and that's how I was called ever after by the Cheyenne. True to Indian ways, no one used my real name; no one even knew it. It was Jack Crabb.⁹

Although Crabb hesitates here to repeat all the chief said because it would "sound silly in English," he frequently repeats Cheyenne conversation, as well as Old Lodge Skins's speeches. He can do this effortlessly, just as he can report on the Cheyenne way of life, in part because he has lived with them, but more important, because it is his own story, which carries the double authority of the captivity narrative and of his white identity: his "real" name is Jack Crabb.

What Berger gives us in *Little Big Man* is a marvelous re-creation of the tall tale that inevitably centers upon the hero as teller. Jack's honestly confessed, self-seeking cowardice and ruthless expediency do not disguise the fact that he is the hero—the hero as sole survivor who gets the last word, and whose words, like his thoughts, are "white to the core" (*LBM*, p. 95). Furthermore, Jack is a familiar American hero, a lonely wanderer without ties of wife and family who cannot tolerate the strictures and hypocrisy of civilization, but who can outshoot the gunslinger and outdo the Indian at being Indian—physically, if not morally, for Jack's "miracles" are really shabby tricks.¹⁰ He resembles Natty Bumppo in his preference for the wilderness and in his loyalty for his Indian "grandfather" (above wife and child at the Washita Massacre), and he has much in common with a long line of actual or spiritual "half-bloods" in American fiction.¹¹ Jack is an intrepid, if not a rugged, individualist, and he chooses for his own heroes Old Lodge Skins and General George Armstrong Custer, whom

he raises to heroic stature through the act of storytelling. Indeed, *Little Big Man* places storytelling, the act of invention, in the foreground, and whatever serious moral points Berger is also making, it is the joy of telling the western story that shines in the serious parody of his text.

The Temptations of Big Bear is Big Bear's story in that it centers on this "small-sized weazen-faced chap, with a cunning restless look,"¹² but it is controlled by an impersonal third-person voice that presents the point of view and frequently the stream of consciousness of people as different in attitudes and experience as "The Honorable Alexander Morris, P.C., Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, the North West Territories and Keewatin"; John Delaney, farming instructor at Frog Lake; Kitty McLean, daughter of the Hudson's Bay Company factor, taken captive at Fort Pitt; the compliant Chief Sweetgrass of the Wood Cree, who has signed a treaty; and Big Bear himself. Although the emphasis is upon Big Bear (his speeches to Indians and whites, his visions and dreams), the novel is an orchestration of voices and perspectives with striking variations in rhetorical style. A brief example of this polyglot quality is difficult to find, but some selections from the opening meeting between Governor Morris and the Indians whom he wishes to sign the treaties illustrate the effect. Morris begins in a patronizing tone: "I am the Representative of the Queen. When you hear my voice you are listening to your Great Mother the Queen" (*TBB*, p. 21). But when the Indians roar with laughter at the idea that Morris's voice is a woman's, the governor's angry words reveal his true sentiments, and other speakers must save the situation:

"Tell that—that—I didn't come here to have my Sovereign Queen insulted by some big-mouth savage. Either they stop immediately or—"

"My friend," [Sweetgrass] said in his soft clear voice to Big Bear, "this is the one who speaks for the Queen. She is the Grandmother. . . . We have accepted his hand, and we wear her red coats."

Big Bear spoke more deliberately than ever, his voice as loud. The buffalo robe built him huge against the sun.

"Yes, you wear her red coats. And you have given your hand. . . . I throw back no man's hand, but I say I am fed by the Mother Earth. . . ."

Big Bear's voice was a tremendous cry echoing over the valley, and again with the interpreter; as if again and again in any language the words of themselves would refuse to stop sounding. (*TBB*, pp. 22-23)

Here Wiebe's focus is upon the group of people, different, separate, yet all together attempting to communicate through words, and the reader is asked to participate in the effort to communicate rather than, as in *Little Big Man*, to enjoy a story. Whereas in Berger's novel we remain with Jack and therefore at a distance from the Indians, here we are placed in their midst without a frame of reference or clear context, and we must listen and judge for ourselves. The balance of these voices allows each one to carry roughly the same amount of weight and authority (at least at this point in the narrative) and stops the reader's immediate, uncritical identification with the white side.

What Wiebe gives us in *Temptations* is a community of peoples and a number of individuals seen in relation to the group. Even Big Bear is significant, less as a separate individual than as a voice, a spokesman for his people and ultimately for human wisdom and faith, because what is at stake in the novel is not an individual's life—a Jack Crabb, a Custer, an Indian chief—but a people's way of life and more, a way of living. Where Berger has focused on the storytelling and its garrulous teller, Wiebe has emphasized the "reality" of people through their documented voices, and the reader, like Erasmus the interpreter, must listen to all sides.

Crucial to this distinction between invented narrative and polyglot meditation on document is the difference in attitudes toward language revealed in these texts. There are two rhetorical styles and lexicons in *Little Big Man*. The first

is the pendantic, self-consciously refined erudition of the pompous Mr. Snell:

I flatter myself that I am not the sadistic bore who so often writes our prefaces and uses them for self-indulgence. I see no reason to take the reader with me on every twist and turn of my search for the individual who proved to be the great frontiersman. (*LBM*, p. 14)

Snell's diction and syntax, his frequent showy quotations and parade of detail, reveal not only his whining vanity and foolishness but also Berger's considerable parodic skill. Snell's use of language gives him away as fully aware of his conventional position of authority and of the power he derives through language and editorial tradition to upstage his "great frontiersman." But this time the task is beyond the likes of Ralph Fielding Snell because Jack Crabb is more than his match.

The second style consists of Crabb's shifting levels of diction, his colorful, wide-ranging vocabulary, and his disregard for the rules of grammar, which together provide Berger with an effective vehicle for the presentation of Jack's domineering personality. Jack can shift from the crude simplicity of the frontiersman—which everyone but Snell can see as a deliberate manipulation, through language, of his image in order to snare Snell—to the epigrammatic wisdom of the natural cynic, to the mellowed idealist. In his letter to Snell, Jack begins: "Deer sir I hurd you was trying to fine me" (*LBM*, p. 16). But he can speak correctly and with a cynical wisdom when he chooses to, as the description of his naming and his many comments on Indians and whites reveal; and it is a Jack Crabb who aspires to sublime heights in reflections like this:

I tell you this, I was still in love with Mrs. Pendrake as ardently as I had ever been, after all them years and battles and wives. That was the real tragedy of my life, as opposed to the various inconveniences. (*LBM*, p. 292)

While extremely entertaining, the incongruity, comedy, and variety of Jack's language

are also functional. In Jack Crabb, Berger has created a character who knows how to exploit and manipulate language and rhetorical style in order to give his listeners what they want or what Snell can be induced to pay for. In short, as a captive of the Indians and the sole survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Jack Crabb is a hoax, but as a self-conscious spinner of tall tales who throughout his narrative is aware of the human propensity for tall tales (Cheyenne and white), he is a genuine fabulator, another in the long line of western mythologizers.

To summarize the language in *The Temptations of Big Bear* is more difficult because there are so many different speakers in the novel, but a few general points can be made. While Jack's style in *Little Big Man* is the familiar, conversational monologue, the language of *Temptations* is, despite the amount of dialogue and some striking interior monologue, more formal and ceremonial, in part because a major component of the narrative consists of formal documents (letters and reports) and public addresses by whites and Indians alike. However, even the narrator uses a complex, ceremonial style. For example, in chapter 1 (*TBB*, pp. 15–16) the narrator describes the approach of the Indians, who are gathering for the meeting with Governor Morris, in a highly metaphorical prose replete with visual images, analogies, and long cumulative clauses. Although it lacks the personal quality characteristic of Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Wiebe's style nonetheless recalls Faulkner's in its structural insistence upon continuity and comprehensiveness. His sentences resist ending, as if to draw out or extend the time of the telling. Where Berger's style moves quickly and breathlessly from brief description to quick summary to exposition of constant activity, Wiebe's prose slows and circles over and over again, as if to mirror the act of contemplation, whether of feeling, gesture, or scene.¹³

Wiebe's great achievement in *Temptations* is with the voice and point of view of Big Bear. For his chief he has created a powerful, heavily metaphoric, almost ritualistic language that, though English, sounds new and startles us with

its strangeness.¹⁴ For example, in describing Big Bear's buffalo hunt, he writes:

He was the curl of a giant wave breaking down upon and racing up the good beach of earth. The running hooves drummed him into another country, calling and calling, and it came to him he had already spread his robe on the Sand Hills, the air in his nostrils beyond earth good, the buffalo effortlessly fanned out before him in the lovely grace of tumbleweed lifting to the western wind. The gashed wounds left in the cow's shoulders and flanks by hunters they had once and then again outrun dripped brilliant red in the rhythmic bunch and release of their muscles, simply beautiful black crusted roses in the green and blue paradise of their running. Dust, bellows, shrieks, rifle explosions, grunts were gone, only himself and the bay stallion rocking suspended as earth turned gently, silently under them in the sweet warmth of buffalo curling away on either side. (*TBB*, p. 128)

The difference between this passage and those narrated from other points of view is less one of kind than of degree. Here again are the long cumulative clauses, the sentences that slow down and resist completion. Here again is the emphasis on metaphor, though this time the metaphors stretch fantastically, almost like conceits. In order to create Big Bear, Wiebe has developed a prose style that is rich in cumulative, circling sentences and unusual, complex metaphors drawn from nature, and his strategy is correct. Through these metaphors, Wiebe is able to assert the reality of the thing, the experience, or the emotion described. Furthermore, he is able to make the mind and point of view of his speaker convincingly present and immediate. Through metaphor he can claim: *this is Big Bear*.

The last point of comparison involves the structure of both narratives, at least insofar as structure tells us something about the differing ways in which Berger and Wiebe conceive of and present their visions of western history and the Plains Indians. To begin with, both narratives are journey quests, not only for their

central characters, but also for the reader, who seeks to understand the facts and fictions of history. But there the similarity ends: *Little Big Man* is an adventure story, a Western to outdo all Westerns, which rivets our attention to rapidly passing events; *Temptations* is a mystery story, both in the sense that the discovery of truth is a process of gradual clarification and in the degree to which it stresses spiritual values and prophetic vision. Where *Little Big Man* provides a series of exciting escapes, reversals, and violent encounters, focusing upon the temporal sequence of events, *Temptations* invites us to consider a given situation that changes very little and to contemplate the mystery of otherness at the center of that situation.

The terms *quest*, *adventure*, and *mystery* are used here in the sense that Tzvetan Todorov defines them in *The Poetics of Prose*. After commenting that one kind of quest narrative posits the question, what happens next? and the other asks, what is the Grail?, Todorov explains,

These are two different kinds of interest, and also two kinds of narrative. One unfolds on a horizontal line: we want to know what each event provokes, what it *does*. The other represents a series of variations which stack up along a vertical line: what we look for in each event is what it *is*. The first is a narrative of contiguity, the second a narrative of substitutions.¹⁵

Looked at in this way, *Little Big Man* is a horizontal narrative of contiguity in which an event—say, the kidnapping of young Jack or the massacre at Washita—makes the reader wonder what will happen next; what this event will do to the story. *The Temptations of Big Bear*, however, is a complex vertical narrative of substitutions in which a basic situation—Indian confrontation with white—is repeated with slight variations, one episode substituted for another, until the reader discovers what the essence of this situation is. Although we are constantly reminded in *Little Big Man* of the vast distances and spaces Jack covers, our

interest is sustained by the pacing and the temporal sequence of his tale; in *Temptations*, despite its six-part chronology, our interest is held by the circling sky, by the circle of speakers, by the space of the prairie between “the Forks and the Missouri,” between the Battle and North Saskatchewan rivers, between Fort Pitt and Fort Carleton, between a penitentiary cell and the Sand Hills, and above all, by the mind of Big Bear himself.

What the different structures of these narratives reveal is consistent with the point of view and language of the texts. The narrative of contiguity, like the story of Jack’s life and the metonymic quality of his rhetoric, emphasizes the unfolding events, or parts, of the story—a frontier story, a captivity story, a sole-survivor story, and finally, an American Western.¹⁶ The narrative of substitutions emphasizes the mystery of a wise and noble human being trapped in a bewildering situation but maintaining to the end his dignity and spiritual power. The Big Bear we discover in chapter 1 is the same person we see on the last pages of the novel, but he is an alien presence, a hostile Indian, the “other” revealed, yet never violated or explained away, because the power of his mystery is still intact.

The significance of this difference is especially important to the endings of both texts. Old Lodge Skins and Big Bear die at the end and both go to sacred and exposed wilderness places to die. After careful preparation and prayer, Old Lodge Skins lies down and wills his death, but his final words direct his attention, not to death, wisdom, or the Cheyenne people, but to Jack: “Take care of my son here . . . and see that he does not go crazy” (*LBM*, p. 445).¹⁷ What is more, Mr. Snell gets the final word, and he leaves us with the either/or of American romance, a choice between two kinds of stories: either Jack is “the most neglected hero in the history of this country or a liar of insane proportions” (*LBM*, p. 447). When Big Bear dies, he prays for pity from the Great Spirit and thinks long thoughts “of power and confederation and of his people” (*TBB*, p. 414). More important, Big Bear

dies in silence with his head to the north, his face toward the rising sun in the east, and his body one with the space of the land.

I have suggested that *Little Big Man* and *The Temptations of Big Bear* could be described respectively as Western and Northern novels as a way of clarifying the important differences between two texts. According to Fiedler, the essence of "all genuinely mythic descriptions of the West, all true Westerns [is] a kind of Higher Masculine Sentimentality," and in this sense, as well as others, Berger's novel is a "true Western."¹⁸ Beyond the satire, the comedy, and even the historical authenticity of the text is precisely this vision of individual, white masculinity that recognizes its close spiritual bond with the Indian male. Not only does Jack achieve his greatest moment of peace by behaving in the traditional manner of the Cheyenne husband, but he also performs the son's sacred rites of burial for the father, after receiving Old Lodge Skins's final blessing: "Take care of my son here." What is more, *Little Big Man* presents us with a boisterous recapitulation of all the essential ingredients of the Western adventure story, including colorful Indians (from wise Chief to compliant squaw), violent encounters between cavalry and Indians or settlers and Indians, gold rush fever, frontier towns and their mythic inhabitants, and so on. It is this variety, of nearly epic proportions, together with the "Higher Masculine Sentimentality," that makes the novel so successful as a Western movie. In fact, it could be argued that the change of the ending of Jack's story in the movie, in which Old Lodge Skins's magic fails and the two go off together in the fading light, is Penn's heavy-handed response to the underlying sentimentality in Berger's conclusion to Jack's story and in the self-indulgence of his tall tale.¹⁹

According to Robert Kroetsch, the essential Canadian experience is the encounter with a northern frontier that man faces in silence, not wishing to conquer it and on some level wanting to be overwhelmed and united with it.²⁰

There is something at once threatening and mysterious about such a landscape, and these qualities are extended to include the Indian peoples who are at home in a northern landscape. It seems to me that Wiebe's *Temptations* takes place in just such a wilderness and that it expresses precisely these qualities of silence, threat, identification, and above all, mystery. Where *Little Big Man* is a bawdy, secular text, truly representative of the Western paradigm, *Temptations* is a religious text, a meditation upon a saintly man who withstands the temptations of violence and easy acquiescence and remains true to the spiritual life within his northern spaces. It is, as well, a celebration of a community and a way of life that requires a community of celebrants—the many voices of the text and the reader—to complete the ritual. Although it would be wrong to say that *Temptations* could not be filmed, it could not be filmed as a Western. The adventure-story structure of Berger's text transfers smoothly to the technicolor wide screen of Penn's film, but *Temptations* has a different structure with comparatively little consecutive external action. If it were transposed literally to the screen, *Temptations* would make a disastrously boring Western, and if a director insisted upon approaching the novel through the story, the resulting screenplay would be an unrecognizable reduction of Wiebe's text. However, Wiebe was fascinated by several extant photographs of the Cree Chief, and these photographs suggest the appropriate visual analogue for his text. In their static silence they invite meditation but never release all their amazing mystery and otherness. If *Little Big Man* makes a rollicking Western, *The Temptations of Big Bear* can be seen as a sequence of stills, fearlessly embracing the silence.

The American Western, then, is a secular adventure story, dependent upon action, violence, and colorful individuals. It is a masculine story, racing through time and ending in radical disunity. It stems from a variety of literary models, but for *Little Big Man* the most important of them is the captivity narrative. Jack Crabb's literary lineage begins in North America

with Cotton Mather and his vision of the New World as a battleground between the forces of good and evil and the white man as the predestined victor who would claim, occupy, and structure the West according to his revealed ideology. In such a battle, the "hostiles" must lose, and despite his sympathy, knowledge, even spiritual kinship with them, the white man must go on winning, if only by having the last word. Through its storyline, satire, comedy, and violence, and above all the parody that unites all these elements, *Little Big Man* adds to and continues the Western mythology, and along with Berger we are able to stand back, watch, and weep as Old Lodge Skins dies. To do so has become part of the myth.

By contrast, the Canadian Northern is a mystery story that celebrates the community, and when violence occurs it erupts from within the group and leaves "losers" on all sides. It is a feminine story, located in space and ending in the fusion of man and landscape through death. Like the Western, it stems from literary models, but those models, unlike the American, have not been self-consciously literary until very recently. For *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the main model cannot be the captivity narrative, because the Indians are perhaps more captive than the whites. Wiebe's model is, as he says, the "chronicle tradition of story-telling where nothing much happens"; his text resembles the narrative or journal of the explorer and chronicler who passes through a landscape, experiencing it, but approaching tentatively before withdrawing to leave it intact and alone.²¹ The reader, too, is like this ideal chronicler. He explores the text, listens to the voices, experiences the fear and wonder of the land and, most important, contemplates the mystery of otherness until, through the metaphor of silence in the closing vision of the text, he becomes Big Bear.

NOTES

1. The studies that have most influenced my thinking on the subject are: Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian*

and the Idea of Civilization (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965); Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968); Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1971); Richard Vanderbeets, "The Indian Captivity Narrative as Ritual," *American Literature* 43 (1971-72): 548-62; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Louise K. Barnett, *The Ignoble Savage: American Literary Racism, 1790-1890* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975); William J. Scheick, *The Half-Blood: A Cultural Symbol in 19th Century American Fiction* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979); Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet, eds., *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980); Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

2. Fiedler, *Vanishing American*, p. 24. For discussions of the Canadian literary West, see William H. New, *Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New Press, 1972); Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973); Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977).

3. Jay Gurian, "Style in the Literary Desert: *Little Big Man*," *Western American Literature* 3, no. 4 (1969): 296.

4. In "Translating Life into Art: A Conversation with Rudy Wiebe," reprinted in *A Voice in the Land: Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe*, ed. by W. J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), p. 129, Wiebe states that "the story was so good that it would be stupid to invent any other line, especially to invent any other characters."

5. Keith, *Voice in the Land*, p. 237. A fine example of Wiebe's use of extant documents is the quotation from Edgar Dewdney's letter to

the superintendent-general of Indian affairs in Ottawa dated 17 December 1885; Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), pp. 110–23. This seven-page letter appears in part 1 of the *Report of the Department of Indian Affairs, for the year ended 31 December, 1885*, pp. 139–45, published by the Government of Canada.

6. In addition to Fiedler's discussion of *Little Big Man* in *The Return of the Vanishing American*, pp. 160–64, see: Brian W. Dippie, "Jack Crabb and the Sole Survivors of Custer's Last Stand," *Western American Literature* 4, no. 3 (1969): 189–202; Jay Gurian, "Style in the Literary Desert: *Little Big Man*," *Western American Literature* 3, no. 4 (1969): 285–96; Delbert E. Wylder, "Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* as Literature," *Western American Literature* 3, no. 4 (1969): 273–84; Leo E. Oliva, "Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* as History," *Western American Literature* 8, nos. 1–2 (1973): 33–54; Michael Cleery, "Finding the Center of the Earth: Satire, History, and Myth in *Little Big Man*," *Western American Literature* 15, no. 3 (1980): 195–211. All critics of the novel comment upon its mixed style of comedy, satire, realism, and myth, and experience difficulty in describing its fictional type or mode. Both Dippie and Cleery, for example, are reluctant to see the novel as merely parody, but this hesitance stems from an inadequate understanding of the possibilities and formal complexity of modern parody. For a thoughtful analysis of modern parody, see Linda Hutcheon's "Parody without Ridicule: Observations on Modern Literary Parody," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 5, no. 2 (1978): 201–11. Using the critical theory of the Russian Formalists, Hutcheon argues that parody should be seen as "literary," a type of "intertextuality," or a "metaliterary form," and that it should not be confused with satire because in "modern parody . . . no such negative judgement is suggested in the contrast of texts" (p. 204).

7. Keith, *Voice in the Land*, p. 136.

8. Gurian, "*Little Big Man*," p. 295, refers to correspondence with Berger; see Wiebe's own comment in "Public Eye," in *For Openers*, ed. by Alan Twigg (Madiera Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1981), p. 215.

9. Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man* (New

York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1964), pp. 93–94. All references in the text are to this edition.

10. Two good examples of Jack's tricks are the "arrow-out-of-arse trick" (p. 66) and his "mirror-ring" trick with Hickok (p. 322).

11. In *The Half-Blood*, Scheick points out how the "figurative half-blood," who must be white, was romanticized in the nineteenth century. There are elements of this figure in Berger's Jack Crabb.

12. Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p. 402. All references in the text are to this edition.

13. In "Rudy Wiebe: Spatial Form and Christianity in *The Blue Mountains of China* and *The Temptations of Big Bear*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 22 (Summer 1981): 42–61, Glenn Meeter argues convincingly that *Temptations* is a successful use of narrative spatial form, as Joseph Frank describes it, to portray a Christian vision and a Christ-like hero. Meeter stresses Faulkner's stylistic influence on Wiebe.

14. In "Translated into the Past: Language in *The Blue Mountains of China*," in Keith, *Voice in the Land*, pp. 97–123, Magdalene Falk Redekop discusses Wiebe's use of language to "defamiliarize" and thereby expand our perceptions. She also points to general stylistic parallels between Faulkner and Wiebe, and comments upon his successful use of metaphor and silence.

15. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 135.

16. For an early discussion of the metonymic possibilities of language, see Roman Jakobson's essay, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles," in *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1956), pp. 76–82. David Lodge uses Jakobson's theory to outline a typology of modern narrative in *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

17. In the movie we are told that sometimes the magic does not work, and this serious moment becomes a joke as Jack and his "grandfather" walk away together.

18. Fiedler, *Vanishing American*, p. 168.

19. A comparison of some of the comments in Bataille and Silet, *The Pretend Indians*, on

Penn's film version of *Little Big Man* is revealing. Philip French describes it as a "beautifully realized evocation of Cheyenne life," despite limitations (p. 105). However, Rita Keshena claims that Cheyenne culture and belief have been "traded in for low comedy and cheap laughs" (p. 108), and Dan Georgakas, who sees certain virtues in the film, believes it fails to confront the important issues "as it moves simple-mindedly from massacre to massacre" (p. 140). If we remember that the film, like the novel, is an example of modern parody, then it is no longer necessary to accuse it of failing to do what it did not set out to do.

20. In "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition," *English Quarterly* 4 (Summer 1971): 46-49, Kroetsch remarks that the Canadian writer's "peculiar will towards silence . . . is summed up by the north. The north is not a typical American frontier, a natural world to be conquered and exploited. Rather . . . it remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence. We don't want to conquer it.

Sometimes we want it to conquer us." A list of Canadian Northerns should extend from Harriet Cheney's "A Legend of the Lake" to John Richardson's *Wacousta*, Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, Gwendolyn MacEwen's *Noman*, Peter Such's *Riverun*, and Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*, to several long poems. In her article, "The 49th Parallel and the 98th Meridian: Some Lines for Thought," *Mosaic* 14, no. 2 (1981): 165-75, Frances W. Kaye has already outlined some of the basic literary and historical distinctions between the American and Canadian Wests, particularly with respect to the role of women, and I am pushing her point that the Canadian West in literature is "essentially the domain of women" a little further. Several essays in *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. by Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979), have influenced my thinking in this matter.

21. Keith, *Voice in the Land*, p. 228.