

Cyril Passfield: Out West

1

A grey July day in Vancouver. Seagulls circling over the bay. Lining up to apply for work on a freighter. Wonder where that one's going over there? Could be anywheres at all. There's ships from these docks goes out all over the world. Anywhere there's water – that's where they goes. There might be horses being shipped or maybe cattle. We could tend the stock while the sailors sail the ship. Wouldn't it be something for us to work our way to Hong Kong? Once in a while the whole line shuffles towards the shed. But ya gotta get a card, though. If you don't get no card, you ain't goin' nowhere. Only able-bodied seamen get to go. That shouldn't be so hard. With all these freighters in the docks, they must need hands. All these people coming out of the shed – are they all hired?

2

The train is stopping for water. Somewhere near Red Deer, as far as we can tell. Dark as can be outside. Just a light-bulb on a pole at the end of the yards. Wonder where we can get some food? Let's swing down here and have a look 'round. Swinging down out of the boxcar and swinging right back up again! What the heck was that noise? Do you know what that sounded like! A big loud 'ping' on the side of the boxcar! Sounds like bullets whizzing by! We peak around the corner and there's a big old Ford bucking frantically across the tracks! Just leaping over the tracks – coming straight at us! We duck back into the corner and lie down flat on the floor! A few more shots and a few more pings on the side of the car! The headlights glare inside our boxcar! The car goes roaring by! We lie still and things are awful quiet for a while. Then a lurch and the train starts moving. We stay down in the corner and listen as the train moves through the yards. Moving slowly and picking up speed. The both of us keeping well away from the door.

3

Striking out across the prairie. Finding the trail that takes the direction we're supposed to go. We come up to the top of a hill and it takes our breath away. Two Alberta deer! Two big, grey Alberta deer! Ten or fifteen feet away! Standing in the middle of the trail and nuzzling each other! We stand silently and watch. They don't see us. Don't know we're here. A beautiful sight! Truly beautiful! Finally, they sense our presence and sprint away.

4

Stooking, stooking stooking. Gathering up eight sheaves. Two and two and two and two. Standing them up in a shock, all leaning together. Drinking a gallon of water a day. Wearing the fingers out of a pair of thick leather gloves. Working in a field at least a mile long. Stopping for a drink and a stretch for the back. Be back in this field tomorrow and stooking all day again. Seven hundred acres, all waiting for stooking. Seven hundred acres all waiting for me.

5

Spending a wonderful day in Port Arthur. Washing up at the Y and spending ten cents on a meal. A great big warehouse with tables of food. Soup on electric burners. Urns of coffee – help yourself. Cold meats on platters – left over from the restaurants. Stale cakes and day-old cookies for dessert. Whole families in line, with each child holding a dime. Everybody in the family eating their fill. Waiting to catch an Eastbound train. Lounging around the waterfront. A deep blue haze hanging over the water. Grain boats coming and going all day. Makes me wish I had my easel and my paints. The most lazy and enjoyable day of the whole darn trip.

Planning Out West

1

There is always a necessity to retain the essence of a valuable resource while shaking free of the form of that same resource, in order to be able to forge a form of one's own which will be a vehicle, an image-envelope, for one's own sense of response to the world of one's own personal & societal experience. I am working towards that form for this particular novel as I soak myself in the essence of my sources, & free myself from the form of the told-story.

2

My dad's reticence. It was all inside with him. He never talked about his feelings. None of us did, nor did we think we should. We knew that that was the best way to live. We lived in mime, in a sense, in the best and most positive sense of mime – mime as a means of communication. My brother kind of sees my dad as wounded. I see him as deeply wounded by his dad's death at seven years old (fifty-four for his dad), but I see him as coping best by living an outer life of low-speech levels (just the facts) and an inner life of communication by mime (what I do is what I am thinking). I see my dad's life as the right life for him, and none of us suffered from it as a consequence. In fact, that we three (my brother and sister and I) are all a blend of our dad and our mom is to our advantage.

3

Writing some Outer-frames for Chapters 2-6. Keeping them deliberately low-key, under the radar. My model for my dad, in the Outer-frames, is my grandson, Saul Passfield. Everything, to Saul, is interesting in itself. Every event or item seems to have no past or future reference, nor any underlying significance. This is true, in a sense, for all of us. We are affected deeply by the imagery of our lives, which occur to us as we live our life-experiences, but some imagery digs deep into our psyches and will have much more significance later in life than appears to us as we encounter it casually, in the course of our daily lives.

4

Well, this is my Death Day. Yesterday, while re-reading this notebook, I came upon the passage where I worked out my dad's days on earth. He died at seventy-two years and 154 days. I am seventy-

two right now and it works out that if I were to have the same number of days on earth, I would die today, January 3, 2018, so it is fitting that I am working on my dad's novel today. We are in a hotel room in New York state, so I will work on the novel all day with breaks for my wife and I to go out to shop and have lunch and perhaps to the swimming pool and the hot tub. It is not a traumatic day for me, but I would say that it's a sobering one. It is odd for a seventy-two year old man (me) to be thinking of a seventy-two year old man (my dad) while writing about that man (my dad) at twenty-three years old.

5

Everyone needs a personal mythology. The main character (my dad) does not have one yet, but he is in the process of forming one. A mythology is an idea-pattern into which all pertinent information can be fitted. In the process of turning from un-interpreted information to interpreted information an item of information becomes an image. This is what Blake meant when he said that he must create his own myth or be enslaved by that of another. He saw the Bible imagery as information which had been interpreted by others as the Christian-myth. He reduced those images to un-interpreted information and then interpreted them into the imagery of his own personal myth. Likewise, Marx saw the information of European society as information which had been interpreted by the elites as images of their own Capitalistic myth. He reduced these images to un-interpreted information and interpreted this information into the imagery of his own Marxist myth. We do this as individuals, as interest groups, as societies and as world-dwellers. My dad, the main character, is in the process of taking:— all of the information of his life so far, — the information of the trip to the west of Canada in the summer of 1932, and — whatever hopeful possibilities and dreaded fears he has for the future, and building a myth — a personal idea-pattern (which includes his own personal experiences, his place in his society as well as his place as an earth-dweller) — into which he can interpret this loose bag of information so that it will all have meaning as elements of supporting imagery in an idea-pattern / an objective correlative of his entire life, past, present and future.

The Making of Out West

1

There are three main sources for this novel: — in 1932, my dad kept a day-by-day diary of his trip out to Western Canada to work in the harvest of that year. — in 1976, when my dad was 66 years old, I interviewed him about his life. I made a list of topics and asked him questions and audio-recorded his answers.— in 1981, after my dad's death, I typed his 1932 diary and read it to his friend, Charlie Thompson, and audio-taped Charlie's response to my dad's diary notations. All of these records were made without any thought of writing a novel on the topic. I later collected them in my family book, Oak Street: The Passfields, which I will post on my website when this journal is completed.

2

I wondered, as I approached my dad's summer in Western Canada as a novel-topic, whether I could overcome my sense that it made a good family memoir, and turn it into a novel as wide and deep in thematic scope as my other novels. I am very pleased with the result. Perhaps the biggest gain in writing this novel is in the sense that, for future novel-topics, I will be able to find the imagery in a wide

range of sources which will allow me to turn the source-story into a literary presentation of the highest order.

3

My dad mentions in the diary that an old fellow gives a diary to him as he is starting out on the journey. My dad wrote the diary in pencil, and when I was a boy, he spent an evening or two reading the diary to we three kids – Bob, Ann and John – and elaborating on its contents. As he read, he wrote over-top of the penciled words in ink. After his death, I turned the diary into a print version and sent it to Charlie Thompson, whom my brother and I had chatted with at our dad’s funeral. I subsequently audio-taped Charlie’s elaboration of the notes in the diary, fifty years after the original event.

4

By December 2012, while planning and writing my Pompeii novel (Pompeii: Vesuvius Dominus), I was seeing the episodic nature of my dad’s trip out West as a problem to be solved. I felt uneasy about this until I was in the full-time planning and writing mode for this novel. In these notes, I have written about the Ingmar Bergman / Saul Passfield Theory of Bubble-chasing, which was another breakthrough for me, in terms of novel-structure, and eased my mind enough for me to write the Outer-frame.

5

Yesterday was my dad’s birthday (June 22, 1909 - October 31, 1981). His 109th birthday. When my dad died, it was a great consolation, to me, that if he were to come back to life, I would not have any regrets to tell him about concerning our relationship. It was a wonderful father-son relationship and I am sure that I modeled my own fatherhood on him. I would now have something to tell him, should he come back for a day: that I have turned his diary of the summer of 1932 into a fine poetic novel with his name on the cover.

6

It has been a very unique experience, to be able to work so closely with my dad’s own writing and, in a sense, to share the writing of this novel with him. All along, I have thought of this as “dad’s novel”, and in a number of ways, it is. At the same time, it is a creative, poetic novel which has many elements which my dad would not have written and which he would be baffled to read in a novel which purports to be the thoughts of himself, at twenty-three years old, in the summer of 1932.