

Re-visioning Documentary Readings of Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy*

By Anne Geddes Bailey

Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy* is shaped by a symbolic structure. Onto the particulars of the prairie dustbowl, Marriott superimposes a prophetic vision of the apocalypse. This vision is created through a montage of fragmentary images, disconnected dialogue, and incomplete description. Regardless of these modernist poetic techniques, however, until recently, *The Wind Our Enemy* is most often cited and studied as a documentary poem which powerfully portrays suffering in the Saskatchewan dustbowl of the nineteen thirties. Ruth Scott Philp, who interviewed Marriott in 1982, remembers *The Wind Our Enemy* for its realism rather than for its poetic technique: "When I read her description of the years of drought and the struggles of farmers to scratch a living from a soil whipped bare by the endless wind, I thought, here is someone who knows about the depression — someone who has lived through it" (11).¹ It is curious that Philp emphasizes the poem's realism in spite of information that she herself discovered during her conversation with Marriott. Philp reveals that Marriott's poem was "the product of a brief summer spent visiting an aunt in Southern Saskatchewan" (11) and that, in fact, Marriott did not "live through" the depression on the Saskatchewan prairie. Marriott also told Philp that, early in her career, she was influenced by Ira Dilworth's reading of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which "turned her interest toward modern poetry" (11). Yet, instead of reconsidering the poem in light of this new information, Philp continues to assert an autobiographical, historical reading of the poem.

Despite an extensive search, I have been unable to find Ira Dilworth's reading of Eliot's poem in order to ascertain what specific influence it might have exercised over Marriott.

Nevertheless, Marriott does seem to have seen Eliot's waste land in the Canadian prairie and to a certain extent uses his poem as a model for her own. In his recent book, *The Gay] Grey Moose*, D.M.R. Bentley considers the influence of modernists such as

James Joyce and T.S. Eliot on Marriott's style. He notes that "extensive use is made in its middle sections of various techniques — montage, unfinished sentences, snippets of popular culture, the comments of unidentified voices — that were assembled by Joyce and Eliot to describe the spiritual deserts of early twentieth-century Europe" (71). Thematically, both *The Wind Our Enemy* and *The Waste Land* explore the futility of human communication, sexuality, and spirituality in an infertile environment. At the same time, Marriott, like Eliot, gestures toward a spiritual model which transcends and redeems the barren landscape. In Eliot's poem, various religious and mythological patterns are embedded in the fragmentary picture of urban life, raising the realistic, particular elements of the poem into transcendent significance and linking the disjointed bits of narrative and voice into a possible unity. Similarly, Marriott fuses an ancient, theological paradigm onto the current, documentary narrative of her poem. Ultimately, however, she finds Eliot's model inadequate for her vision of the Saskatchewan landscape. For example, both Derek Traversi and Armin Paul Frank argue that Eliot's use of the "three traditional Sanskrit words *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata*" — give, sympathize, and control — hint at "some suggestion of positive content" in *The Waste Land* (Traversi, 51). In sections five, six and seven of her poem, Marriott effectively shows how giving, sympathizing, and controlling do not elevate people from the Saskatchewan waste land: giving becomes receiving, sympathy becomes illusory happiness, and attempts to control one's life become futile. Even though there are thematic differences between the two poems, Marriott is clearly influenced by Eliot's view of the waste land. Thus, in order to understand the complexities of the poem, one must move beyond conventional, documentary views of *The Wind Our Enemy*.

Perhaps Marriott's religious imagery has been ignored by critics because Dorothy Livesay, in her influential article on "The Documentary Poem," cites *The Wind Our Enemy* as an example of the documentary tradition in Canadian long poems. Although Livesay merely mentions Marriott's poem, this citation has influenced most readings of *The Wind Our Enemy*. Northrop Frye, for instance, presents a political reading of the poem. He contends that the poem is a "protest of a food-producing community cheated out of its labour . . . by some mysterious financial finagling at the other end of the country" (168). This socialistic interpretation cannot be sustained by the poem when suggestions of progress and hope are continually thwarted by the narrative. Noting this, Andrew Stubbs and Jeanette Seim persuasively argue that throughout the

poem, "narrative is an ironic conception working, as it does, against much else that happens in the poem. Narrative amounts to a sequence of failures and if anything the story is exhausted by its telling" (49). Stubbs and Seim suggest, instead, that the poem is organized through a series of temporal progressions: "the poem begins with a lyrical evocation of 'the last good year' and ends with a climatic, or anticlimactic pronouncement that rain 'must' come" (48). Yet, Stubbs and Seim also acknowledge that this temporal framework is "continuously being undermined The tendency of narrative is not toward resolution but a vision of utter desolation" (48). What Stubbs and Seim do not resolve is the tension between Marriott's sympathetic treatment of her subject and her apparent lack of hope or purpose. In arguing that Marriott's unifying principle is temporal, they, too, privilege the realistic, historical narrative. However, the patterns which Marriott chooses to unify her work can be discovered, not in the narrative of the Saskatchewan drought which is her subject, but in a close reading of the religious symbolism in the poem which reveals her theme.

I do not want to suggest that *The Wind Our Enemy* has no socio-historical relevance, but I find that such readings ignore much of the poem's imagery and fail to account for the narrator's contradictory tone, which expresses both sympathy and contempt for those who live in the Saskatchewan waste land. Reading the poem through its religious subtext, I wish to argue that Marriott's picture of the drought-ridden prairie becomes more than a sympathetic evocation of the depression. Contrary to Frye's reading of the poem, *The Wind Our Enemy* is not primarily an indictment of easterners who became tired of caring about the prairie drought. Instead, much of the religious symbolism of the poem, which is based on an apocalyptic model, works against the external, socio-historical narrative of the depression and again links Marriott's poetics to those of Joyce and Eliot. As Bentley remarks, religious patterns — "most obviously the pattern of Christ's suffering and potentially renovating promise — rise to the surface at several points in the poem" (71). Marriott's poem presents a didactic message to those farmers enduring the drought to wake up and look at the signs in front of them. Rather than absolving the farmer of culpability in his time of suffering, Marriott firmly places responsibility in each individual's hands as she elevates the battleground from the historical into the spiritual. Individuals confront their God, not nature, in this apocalyptic poem.

The diction and symbolism throughout *The Wind Our Enemy* echo Christ's account of His Second Coming which He prophecies shortly before His death and is recorded in all the gospels, but most

extensively in Matthew 23-25. Marriott clearly envisions the drought in Saskatchewan as a period of "great tribulation" (Matt. 24:21). Similarities can be found in Christ's description of the "abomination of desolation": " 'But when ye shall hear of wars and commotions, be not terrified: for these must first come to pass; but the end is not by and by. Then said he unto them, Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from heaven' " (Luke 21: 9-11). The dry, dusty and barren landscape in the poem brings "famine" and "pestilence" to its inhabitants. The only plant to survive during the drought is Russian thistle. Chickens feed on grasshoppers instead of seed. In section six, there are rumours of war and the multicultural celebration described in section seven suggests that the prairie community is becoming increasingly fragmented while the outside society "in the east and west" (VII, 2) turns away from them. "Fearful sights" occur frequently as natural order is inverted; thunder and lightning ring empty and the cowardly "yellow sun conquer[s] the storm" (IV, 9). Horses go crazy, circling water drums in "mad relentless circle" (V, 21). By the end of the poem, two lone figures are completely isolated in the pale moonlight with Poverty and Fear "strid[ing] loudly out / Across the pitiful fields, none to oppose" (IX, 10-11). The rest of the community has given up, "lying in bed forever" (IX, 5), unprepared to meet God. Only those who are watching "shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" to collect the "elect" who remain faithful throughout the tribulation (Matt. 24: 31-2).

The opening frame of the poem introduces the reader to the apocalyptic narrative immediately. The repetition of the word "wind" creates a sense of urgency and Marriott's imagery sets up scenes of betrayal which threaten the possibility of redemption. The first stanza, describing the decay of a farmhouse, echoes Christ's prophetic description of Jerusalem as it will appear at the Second Coming: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (Matt. 23: 38). In the final stanza, the wind "whipping the shoulders worry-bowed too soon" (I, 13) and "knifing in the wounds" (I, 3) reminds the reader of Christ's crucifixion. This image of sacrifice does not promise salvation but is a "grim prophecy" (I, 14) of old age and death. In contrast, the wind in the second stanza appears playful, "surging down cocoa-coloured seams" (I, 7) and "darting in about / white hoofs and brown" (I, 8-9). The contradictory actions of the wind suggest the apocalyptic wind which arrives unexpectedly, "snatching" (I, 9) away the

richness of life, and carrying both "bitter dust" (I, 12) and "glory" (V, 5) on its wings. By the end of the first section, the brown earth is grey dust, suggesting that the "abomination of desolation" (Matt. 24: 15) is upon the land. Yet, this wind also announces the apocalyptic return of Christ, a return which promises redemption after desolation: "then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30).²

As *The Wind Our Enemy* progresses, language in this prairie waste land is gradually divested of meaning, as the characters give in to despair and become alienated from God. In the closing frame, the wind and other signs seem to have completely lost their power. The strong wind of the first section becomes a wind playing "a lonely laughterless shrill game/ with broken wash-boiler" (X, 2-3). Where once it "surged" down the brown rows of soil, the wind eventually seems diseased, "throwing up / section of soil" (X, 4-5). The repetition of the word "wind" also shows this progressive corruption of language. Each repetition becomes a mere echo of the one before it until the word "God" (X, 6), spoken profanely in the final stanza of the poem, becomes parallel to the word "wind" now robbed of the divine force it held in the first stanza. Without divine significance, the wind "becomes a negative term, only signifying an 'absence' " (Stubbs and Seim, 48). This separation between word and meaning reflects the growing rift between God and the people, a story told in the main body of the poem. Marriott's apocalyptic story conflates two biblical narratives which show both the inherent sinfulness of the human race, in the fall of Adam and Eve, and the redemption available through the crucifixion of Christ. In the second section of the poem, the reader finds a new Eden. Marriott uses similes, creating a paradise in western Canada. Water and light imagery suggest abundance and fertility. In spring time the land is covered by a green silk sheet which becomes "an ocean of flecked gold" (II, 7) in the fullness of autumn. The "crisp waves" (II, 8) of the wheat fields never fall into themselves but remain endlessly at their peak. In this paradise, the "biscuit" (II, 8) of communion is "sweet" (II, 8) and perfect harmony exists between God, the people, and the world.³

Throughout this section, Marriott's grammar and syntax are straightforward and correct, smoothly flowing like the ocean of wheat. Using free verse without set rhythms or rhymes, she suggests a natural correlation between speaking voice and poetry. However, "a great broad snake" (II, 4) hovers beneath the surface threatening to show itself in the "light" (II, 6), and the fullness of

autumn is transitory, becoming "the last good year — " (II, 10).

In section three, a man and a woman enter this prairie Eden and the fall is reenacted in New Testament terms. At the same time, syntax begins to disintegrate with Marriott's increased use of dashes, parentheses, and ellipses. Instead of betraying the land for knowledge, this archetypal Adam and Eve are like Judas, betraying Christ for money. The man loves his land because "its broad spread [promises] all his granaries might hold" (III, 6). The "woman's eyes could kiss the soil" (III, 7) as she longs for a new dress and china. This commercialism makes sexuality barren and dry; "a hot hand scorching the flesh it would caress" (III, 12). Love between the man and the woman is mediated through the land and their lust for money; the man loves his land while the woman kisses the soil in return. Marriott's use of synecdoche in these lines — "a man's heart" and "a woman's eyes" — also reflects a corrupt connection between the couple and their land. After the fall, language also begins to degenerate and meaning becomes slippery. Like Adam and Eve who ask for God's forgiveness after their disobedience, the man and woman "pray sun's touch be gentleness" (III, 11). Unlike Adam and Eve, the man and woman use words which carry multiple meanings and obscure their communication with God. In this paganistic prayer to the sun, rather than the Son, the subject and articles are left out, and periods are dropped off or replaced with ellipsis. Yet, the punning prayer also suggests the arrival of the Son, just as God's edict to Adam and Eve promises redemption even as He throws them out of paradise. When the man leaves the fields which are "'dried out'" (III, 18), he, like Adam, typifies Christ, as Marriott's diction and rhythm echo the Apostle's Creed: "the third day he left the fields. . . ." (III, 16).

Language continues to fail the characters in section four where there is no connection between word and external reality. Predictions of rain become less assertive and more fragmentary, as punctuation moves from a strong exclamation mark to a feeble dash. Because saying "rain" will not bring rain, fewer and fewer words are spoken by Marriott's characters. Lightning and thunder just "mock" these predictions for rain; words, like the clouds, are "'just empties'" (IV, 12). Smiles and laughter, "bending parched lips" (IV, 13), are also divorced from real happiness. Another reenactment of the fall occurs in the fifth section. The galloping rhythm and rhyme scheme of the first stanza in this section create a harmonic description of horses before the Fall. As Wanda Campbell suggests: "Marriott's choice of the word 'feet' over 'hooves' is clearly more than a rhyme with 'sweet' because it implies both that man and beast are one and that the poetic 'feet' echo the

untamed quality of the motion described" (162). Men are in perfect harmony with the horses, feeling the rhythm of the horses' wildness. This edenic description is then compared to the postlapsarian world where horses are lifeless and spiritless, starving from lack of good food and water. This modern Adam's postlapsarian crop is "dry Russian thistle" (V, 16) and Eve is now represented as an "old mare" (V, 17) whose "pregnancy" is diseased. She "heave[s] once" (V, 22) and gives birth to death, rather than redemption as promised to the original Eve. The mare's diseased pregnancy suggests "the beginnings of birth pangs" (Matt. 24:8) which Christ prophesies will occur before His return.

Marriott's use of domestic imagery in the first half of the poem also retells the narrative of the fall. In the Edenic view of the prairie in section two, Marriott uses domestic images which suggest richness: "the wheat in spring was like a giant's bolt of silk" (II, 1). Biscuits recall the freshness of newly baked goods. However, in the next section, these domestic images become signs of betrayal and punishment. Personified, the wheat is now a woman embroidering. Linking this to the snake moving beneath the wheat in the previous stanza, the reader sees the possibility for temptation and sexual corruption. The movement from positive to negative domestic scenes in the poem reflects the biblical view of woman's responsibility for original sin. For example, in section five, feminine images are only used to describe the postlapsarian world. The galloping two-year old colts are strong, sleek, and masculine, but they become feminine in the next verse, likened to "a barren cow" (V, 12) that "makes a man white-sick to see" (V, 10). The prefallen horses with "sides groomed to copper burning in the sun" (V, 2) seem similar to a vision of Christ which John records in the Book of Revelations: "his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as they burned in a furnace" (Rev. 1: 14-5). In contrast, the "old mare" of the fallen world is like Eve: "weaker — stumbling — / She fell" (V, 21-2).

The theme of betrayal, told through the narrative of the man and woman in the second and fifth sections, moves into New Testament myths in the sixth section. Marriott structures the sixth section in several patterns of three. Repetition of "relief" and "maybe", three voices in the third stanza, and three news headlines all point to Peter's denial of Christ. Relief, of which the townspeople get "first pick" (VI, 11), consists of "apples" and "clothes" (VI, 10), again alluding to original sin. By accepting and justifying the need for relief, the characters in this poem have forsaken their own responsibility for perceiving the apocalyptic signs correctly. Instead

of realizing that their suffering is a test of their faithfulness and readiness for Christ's return, they opt for immediate release rather than future salvation. "Relief" comes from the those who "shall deceive the very elect" (Matt. 24: 24). Indeed, these promises of relief turn out to be hollow as

people grew bored
Well-fed in the east and west
By stale, drought-area tales,
Bored by relief whinings,
Preferred their own troubles. (VII, 1-5)

In this sixth section, Marriott links the division between word and meaning to the division between voice and body. For instance, the narrative voice is difficult to ascertain. The tone of each successive repetition of "relief" shifts perspective. The first seems to be a sigh of relief, but whose sigh? The characters'? The narrator's? The reader's? At the second "relief", the meaning of the word shifts away from the personal and emotional to the political and financial, taking on a tone of resignation and justification. By the third repetition of "relief", the word is completely drained of its emotional impact and becomes a simple, detached statement of fact. This same process occurs in each successive bit of dialogue, as the tone shifts from gratitude to resignation to statements of fact in the radio news headlines. In the next section, voice becomes increasingly impersonal and detached from body until it does not matter who speaks the "relief whinings" (VII, 4) since they fall on deaf ears, fulfilling Christ's prophecy that "the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12).

As faith dwindles and language degenerates, religious rituals also become stripped of their divine significance. Marriott parodies the Last Supper and the Pentecost in section seven. Communion is no longer "sweet as a biscuit" (II, 8); instead, it consists of Mrs. Smith's cake and Mrs. Olsen's coffee. The sense of community at the schoolhouse is undermined by discordant music. The sounds of the dance are thin and dry while the songs "mock" the dancers' attempt to find true sympathy and communication. With the wind blowing around them, this multicultural gathering can only manage to create the "mirage" (VII, 36) of happiness instead of the fire of inspiration. The wind of the Pentecost, in contrast, makes Christ's resurrection real to the disciples who are waiting for a sign. In this mock-pentecost, the sign becomes illusory:

All the night's happiness

Seemed far away, unreal
Like a lying mirage,
Or the icy-white glare
Of the alkali slough. (VII, 34-8)

Christ's crucifixion and his imminent return are the controlling symbols of sections eight and nine. Marriott opens the eighth section with the word "presently" (VIII, 1) which suggests that Christ's sacrifice is immediately relevant to her twentieth-century characters. The dust darkens the sky abnormally, reminding the reader of the darkness which descended at midday during Christ's crucifixion. God seems to be "hidden" (VIII, 7), unwilling to save His Son. The "kindness and honesty" of the disciples "[seem] blown away and lost" (VIII, 3-4). Like Christ's disciples who desert Him in His last hours, the farmers cannot see "the staring parable" (VIII, 9) of the cross. They are "dust-blinded" (VIII, 9), forgetting the crucifixion and giving into despair. After committing this gravest of sins, other vices run rampant as the Finn "grows fat on groaning emptiness of souls" (VIII, 20). Just as Christ's crucifixion is made "present," so is his return. In the ninth section of narrative, Marriott moves towards the main confrontation between Christ and His believers as Christ describes it in the parable of the ten virgins. According to Christ's prophecy, immediately before His return "the sun [shall] be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall Fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken" (Matt. 24: 29). In section nine of the poem, "the sun goes down" (IX, 1) and "kerosene lamps are filled and lit / In dusty windows" (IX, 3-4). Likewise, ten virgins "took their lamps, and went to meet the bridegroom" (Matt. 25:1). Are Marriott's characters prepared to meet the "bridegroom"? No, instead, they have succumbed to the "shoddy security" of the "beer-parlour" (VIII, 17-8) and have gone "to eat and drink with the drunken" (Matt. 24:49). Now, they "crave to lie / In bed forever" (IX, 4-5) and are not ready to confront God.

Working against this bleak apocalyptic vision in section nine, however, are Old Testament narratives and the possibility of redemption for the few who are prepared. "Gaunt cows" (IX, 8) remind the reader of the seven years of famine which Egypt survived due to Joseph's prudent action. The plague of "grasshoppers" (IX, 7) suggests the plague of locusts which Moses called upon Pharaoh in order to free the Israelites from Egypt. The two figures standing in their yard also allude to Adam and Eve as they leave the garden, prepared to face the world with the promise that they will parent redemption. They may also symbolize the

couple who will be prepared for the Second Coming and will be "spared" (IX, 18): "Then two shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken and the other left' " (Matt. 24:40-1). As Stubbs and Seim remark, despite these glimpses of hope, the poem still does not offer much cathartic resolution. The man's "strained voice" (IX, 19) has no power and his words simply echo those "sickly-familiar saying[s]" (IV, 10) which suggest hope that "bleak eyes denied" (IV, 14). Still betraying God through the corruption of language, this man and woman seem to be mere reflections of the man and woman in section three. When the two figures stand out in their desolate farmyard, the man does not call on God for rain, but instead, personifies the rain, giving it a will which it does not have.⁴ *God is the only force within the poem who can will the rain to fall.* Ironically, "God" is only called on twice in the poem and only in colloquial expressions which suggest that swearing by God has been reduced to an expression at best or a profanity at worst. The separation of the word from reality is not just an intellectual postulation for Marriott. It also reveals what she perceives as a dangerous separation between the people and God. Christ urges His disciples to beware of liars (Matt. 24:24). Speaking to the Pharisees, Christ angrily denounces their corruption of language: "Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor; Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?" (Matt. 23:16-22). This warning seems to be directed not only at the Pharisees but also at the man and woman in Marriott's poem who swear by the "gold" which the wheat will produce, rather than by the wheat itself or by God who is the ultimate provider.⁵

The discovery of a religious, symbolic subtext in *The Wind Our Enemy* suggests that this poem is about the ability to perceive and read signs correctly. This makes the fact all the more ironic that most of Marriott's readers to date mimic her characters, reading only the depression narrative as a skillful, poetic document of the drought in Saskatchewan and as an indictment against those eastern provinces who "only imperfectly realized that distress" (Collin, 54). Like the farmer who no longer sees God in the land or the Cross in the economic woes he must face, the reader reads only the historical narrative in the poem, not seeing through the words — the signs — to the higher, spiritual dimension. "Dust-blinded to the staring parable" (VIII, 9), Marriott's readers fail to see the

Notes

1. Although W.E. Collin, an early reviewer of the poem, outlines the "use of literary devices" (54) in *The Wind Our Enemy* to discuss its poetic success, he, too, is moved by the realism of the poem, stating that "Marriott tells the story from the inside" and praising the poem "because it dramatizes a moment of our human story, here in Canada" (54). This realist reading of the poem is also accepted by the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, in which Geoff Hancock writes that *The Wind Our Enemy* "describes drought on the Prairies during the 1930's" (519). [\[back\]](#)
2. The double valency of Marriott's wind not only makes her poem similar to *The Waste Land* but also to one of Canada's celebrated high modernist texts, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*. The central symbols in each work, Eliot's fire and water, Watson's double hook and Marriott's wind, contain and unify the contradictory elements inherent in each narrative. [\[back\]](#)
3. Marriott is clearly influenced by imagism in these sections. The autumn wheat field is imaged through the conflation of sea waves and biscuits, reminiscent of H.D.'s "Oread," Marriott returns to this conflation of domestic and agricultural images again in the next two sections when the sky becomes "a new tin pan / Hot from the oven" (III, 13-4), full of unyielding "metal hardness" (IV, 4); see Bentley's discussion of "superimposition" (70-1). [\[back\]](#)
4. In his review of Marriott's work, Donald Stephens sees the farmer's cry as an expression of "optimism unrestrained" (158). Stephen argues that the overall mood of the poem is "one of hope", but this reading ignores the corruption of language and meaning in earlier parts of the poem and does not adequately explain the overwhelming desolation of the last lines of the poem — "No rain, no crop, no feed, no faith, only / wind". It is a leap of a reader's faith to read "*unrestrained*" optimism in the farmer's "*strained* voice" (IX, 20, emphasis added). [\[back\]](#)

5. In contrast to those critics who see the poem as an example of documentary realism, Campbell, in her doctoral thesis, also argues that Marriott's poem is primarily organized through religious symbolism. Campbell concludes that the poem gestures towards hope and rebirth at the end, reading the final stanza as a prayer rather than as an expression of profanity. However, Campbell's vision of hope is born out of a temporal necessity — "every good gardener must have faith in the eventual arrival of seasonal changes that allow the earth to bring forth its miracles" (170) — which exempts the reader from any active interpretation, applied within my apocalyptic reading. [\[back\]](#)

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