

Words Fail Me

John Thurston. *The Work of Words: the Writing of Susanna Strickland Moodie*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1996. 264 pp.

Since its publication in 1852, Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* has occasioned much critical commentary. One cause for debate is its peculiar genre; variously defined as travel literature, fiction, autobiography, and a collection of sketches,¹ it contains elements of all of the above. Adding to the genre confusion is the fact that *Roughing It* is a collaborative effort, containing poetry and prose by Susanna Moodie, her husband, J.W.D. Moodie, and her brother, Samuel Strickland. Moreover, *Roughing It* is a compilation of material written over a number of years—poetry from the 1830s (published in North American periodicals and newspapers), sketches from the 1840s (from the *Victoria Magazine* and the *Literary Garland*), as well as material written specifically for *Roughing It*. Finally, the text's narrative persona expresses contradictory points of view, alternately praising and reviling Canada with equal fervour. Given the many inconsistencies, it is no wonder that critics love to discuss Moodie's *Roughing It* or that the text has risen above its imperfections to take a central place in the Canadian canon.

John Thurston's *The Work of Words: the Writing of Susanna Strickland Moodie* is an ambitious attempt to explain the often troubling miscellany² in Moodie's *Roughing It*. To Thurston, Moodie's inability to settle within a definite genre and her tendency to express polarized points of view are related to a "socially determined bifurcation" (151): Moodie merely mirrors the mutations of a rapidly changing social milieu. Moreover, to be understood properly, *Roughing It* must be placed within the context of Moodie's life and compared to her other writing: "*Roughing It* needs to be opened up to its history and its discontinuities traced to the dispersed social and psychological energies it tries to contain" (134). While on the one hand, "to attempt to interpret *Roughing It* as a unified whole would be perverse" (159), on the other hand, "[w]hat is interesting about the text is not its unity, completion, and wholeness but the expenditure of so much energy and self-examination in a failed attempt [by Moodie] to achieve these qualities" (159). Briefly stated, to Thurston, Moodie's writing represents a life-long (failed) attempt through words to resolve her own emotional and social problems which in turn are related to and reflective of a society in turmoil, and *Roughing It in the Bush* is the culmination of that life's work.

In Chapter One Thurston looks for "the social determinants of Susanna

Strickland Moodie's literary production" (11). He sums up the various upheavals in nineteenth-century British society in order to set up a general backdrop of stressful change and then turns to some more pointed observations about social discord in Moodie's personal background, reminding us that the Strickland family held a tenuous and somewhat ambiguous position in the English middle class, since the father, Thomas Strickland, was a middle-class man seeking to move up into the landed gentry; the family was cut further adrift socially, first by the father's loss of money, and then by his death in 1818, when Susanna and her five sisters (Thurston omits mention of the two brothers) were left in an ambivalent position in a rigidly stratified society. Thurston proposes that the conflicts which mark Susanna Strickland Moodie's life and writing extend beyond societal influences, identifying a family split which pits the three elder sisters, Agnes, Elizabeth, and Jane, against the three younger sisters, Sarah, Catharine, and Susanna, with respect to education, religion, class affiliation, and marital status. Agnes, Elizabeth, and Jane were educated by their father; they were Anglican (with High Church leanings); they endeavoured to continue the upward social movement begun by their father; and they remained single. Sarah, Catharine, and Susanna were educated by the elder sisters, showed leanings towards religious dissent, followed "the downward trajectory initiated by [their father's] business failure and cemented by his death" (20), and got married. Thurston says that the family rift became so pronounced that Susanna turned from her family "filiative" network to develop an "affiliative" one. While this is an interesting proposition, it conflicts with some of Thurston's subsequent arguments and runs counter to information available from other sources. For one thing, in her biography of her sister Susanna, Catharine Traill speaks of a life-long bond of friendship.³ For another, Moodie continued to enlist the support of her elder sisters for publishing purposes—witness the dedication of *Roughing It* to the more famous sister, Agnes, in an attempt to boost sales.

In Chapters Two and Three, Thurston looks at two periods in Moodie's pre-emigration life, 1822-1830 and 1830-1832, and ties events into specific literary productions. Chapter Two, 1822-1830, examines Moodie's earliest forays into the literary world. Despite family (and societal) pressure to remain in the established church, maintain middle-class pretensions, and exploit literary conventions, the young woman looked to dissenting religions, chose liberal-minded friends, and wrote from her own experience. That she had a personal religious crisis and endured familial disapproval in the late 1820s is substantiated by the published letters⁴ (and mentioned by Traill in her biography). The connection that Thurston wishes to trace between the published work of the period and the woman's personal dilemmas is less apparent. When Thurston encounters an inevitable difficulty in linking the two, he counters by proposing that Moodie employs strategies of indirection in her writing that are typical of women writers of the period—we merely have to interpret the work correctly to recognize the autobiographical impulse.

In his analysis of Moodie's early fiction, Thurston cites a children's story, *Hugh Latimer*, in which he says Moodie projects her hopes and fears on to the book's male protagonist. Here and elsewhere, Moodie's deserving but impecunious protagonists are rewarded by Providence with social approval and financial gains. While this plot pattern is by no means unique to Moodie (see Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*), Thurston defines Moodie's use of a well-worn theme as revelatory rather than imitative:

Through didacticism, displacement, and plotting, she freights this story with autobiographical import and through fictional conventions, solves her dilemma. She deals with her experience while hiding its reality from herself and her readers.

(23)

Literary indirection is a popular theme in criticism of women's writing, and it is not difficult to discern various types of indirection employed by Moodie: the use of pseudonyms, the kindly male helping with publication, and so on. Personal indirection (the author is unaware of her indirections) is less clear. As documentation, Thurston notes that Moodie's children's stories all demonstrate the necessity of subduing ungovernable passions and show that a useful life is achieved through resignation to duty. The pervasive use of this theme, he says, is Moodie's attempt (albeit unconscious) to demonstrate to herself and the world that she acquiesces to her "lowly path" (126); yet the constant reiteration proves that she resisted a binding social structure, that she had difficulty subduing her pride and anger, and that for Moodie, "repression is never complete" (25).

Is such repetition autobiographical, though? Children's literature of the nineteenth century tends to be fraught with moral import and replete with frightful accidents for the wicked and wonderful rewards for the deserving. If you see Moodie's fiction (as I do) as simplistic, second-rate, and imitative, then you must also accuse her of exploiting a simple, publishable formula which fits a contemporary niche. Perhaps she expresses her own feelings indirectly, but this is a risky critical path to pursue, especially if the writing is remarkably unremarkable, and the writer shows no awareness—even in her letters—of personal involvement in her stories.

According to Thurston, Moodie's pre-emigration poetry, like her prose, repeats themes revelatory of the writer's unresolved crises. In the recurring theme of captivity, for example, "her figures of imprisonment are self-projections" (34), even though Moodie's prison bars are "economic and sexual" (34); and the nature poems in which contemplation leads to God and a hymn of joy ends in the hope of death are "characteristic of Susanna and her internalization of the morality of her day" (31).

Thurston concludes that Moodie's writing of this period, while mirroring her

angst, fails to solve her problems as to where she fitted into society, literature, and family. Indeed, he says, "Susanna's religious and moral crisis of 1829-30 may have partly been due to frustration with the failure of words to ensure the safe haven she sought" (40). Ultimately, though, Thurston cannot prove that Moodie sought a "safe haven," or that she used words to achieve this purpose, and his overall design fails: Moodie's early poetry and prose efforts are too frail to support the weighty literary edifice erected upon them. He has superimposed an interesting theory on work which cannot substantiate it.

At the outset, Chapter Three seems more promising, since it deals with the well-documented spiritual crisis of the late 1820s (see *Letters* and Traill's "Brief Biography"); perhaps in a time of emotional upheaval, the published work will more clearly mirror the personal life of the writer. As Thurston discusses Moodie's writing through the years of crisis (and after), however, it seems that Moodie's themes and literary treatments remain constant; there is no sudden swerve in the creative direction. Thurston's critical process must be questioned when his arguments cannot be supported by close textual reading.

In his discussion of Moodie's religious awakening, Thurston comments on Moodie's movement away from family, older family friends, and high church allies to form new friendships and new publishing relations, which was, he posits, connected to her new faith:

She rejected assimilation by the fashionable middle class and bound herself to the middle-class oppositional faction of Evangelicism. This transformation made her crisis more acute because it required severing filiative links and forging an affiliative network.

(41)

Was such "assimilation" ever possible for Moodie, though? Given the groundwork established by Thurston (the Stricklands were poverty-stricken, albeit ambitious aspirants to gentry status—doomed to remain on the outskirts of the "best" society), how was Moodie in a position to accept or reject assimilation? Or, as has been questioned, were filiative links ever broken? Undoubtedly Moodie faced family opposition to her emotional embrace of dissent, but Thurston has already established that Sarah and Catharine shared some of Susanna's interests. And if Susanna severed filiative links, what are we to make of Catharine's avowal of life-long friendship (see the Traill family papers), or of Susanna's use of her sister Elizabeth to publish in the *Lady's Magazine* shortly after the time of religious upheaval? Given these and other factors, it is extremely difficult to cast Moodie in the role of voluntarily misunderstood outsider.

Nor is Moodie's writing reflective of inner dilemmas. Moodie published in *La Belle Assemblée*, a fashionable women's magazine, until 1830; then, for a few months she had some work published in a serious literary magazine, the

Athenaeum—the type of periodical seen as an "antidote to the church and crown bias of the court and fashionable magazines" (41). Thurston says that through her contribution of nine pieces to the *Athenaeum*, Moodie "broke her association with the establishment" (41). This is a difficult point to prove, however. To begin with, Moodie published in the *Athenaeum* while her friend, Thomas Pringle, was editor; Thurston indicates that Moodie left when Pringle did but leaves an important question unasked. Did Moodie initially submit work to the *Athenaeum* because of a change in personal commitment or because of literary patronage? Add to this the disquieting thought that, without missing a beat, Moodie began publishing in the fashionable magazines again, this time the *Lady's Magazine* where her older sister Elizabeth was an editor. Thurston has the facts—times, dates, places, people—but has some problem assembling them in a workable fashion. If Elizabeth was an insider at the magazine who could and did help Susanna, what happened to the filiative rupture?

And nor is Moodie's writing in the *Athenaeum* much different from her other work. In fact, Thurston himself frequently links *Athenaeum* pieces with earlier and later writing, thereby adding a discordant note to his claim that they are somehow linked to her time of crisis. To give an example, he proposes that in a serious *Athenaeum* literary review Moodie establishes her view that "History equals medieval history equals romance. She was drawn to romance, not history. Sixteen months before this review she admitted that 'from the age of twelve years' she had 'roamed through the beautiful but delusive regions of Romance'" (43). In other words, this is a long-standing belief, not, as Thurston would have us believe, a newly-minted product of spiritual growth. It is equally futile to discern major changes in the *Athenaeum* poetry. One contribution is a loyal song to the newly-crowned King William IV: "She had long been writing songs: there is no question of her loyalty; and the loyal song was an accepted genre in the periodicals to which she contributed: yet this was her first loyal song" (44). Thurston ties this bold new poetic step to Susanna's religious quest:

As well as being able to proclaim her loyalty to William IV, she was more at ease because of her new religious identity. Both factors, and Eliza's association with the *Lady's Magazine*, allowed her to re-enter the fashionable periodicals through it.

(44)

Now strongly centered emotionally and socially (with a new monarch on the throne), Thurston says, Susanna could refocus on familiar preoccupations: themes of captivity and of living and dying in obscurity, nature poetry, and stories with contrived plots in which Providence arranges financial matters for the deserving few. I would take the facts assembled by Thurston to argue a contrary point of view: the *Athenaeum* experience does not signal a spiritual upheaval; her work in the *Athenaeum* is not recognizably different in form or content; and she has not "severed the sororial ligament" (52) of her "filiative" network.

In Chapter Four, Thurston moves into a second wide-ranging overview, this time of Moodie and her social milieu in Upper Canada, preparatory to his examination of her Canadian writing between 1832 and 1855. The following three chapters derive from this one, and delve into the literary production of 1832-1852, of 1852-1855, and, in a separate chapter, *Roughing It in the Bush*. Within a very short time, Moodie experienced a number of major life changes: marriage, motherhood, and emigration. Any of these is at least as important as her religious crisis; all involve redefining a social role and might reasonably be expected to influence Moodie's work (if it is indeed autobiographical). Oddly, Thurston ignores two of the three, turning his attention to emigration. Thurston comments that Moodie arrived in an unstable Canadian society; as in England, she was writing before a social outcome could be assured and before "a middle class with which she could identify coalesced" (63). The social instability and her resulting personal uncertainty are reflected in her writing, culminating in *Roughing It in the Bush*.

The Moodies settled near Cobourg, on a cleared farm where "[i]nstead of a wilderness waiting the onslaught of displaced English gentlemen, the Moodies found an established society that refused to accommodate their desires for hierarchy and deference" (69). Unable to understand or get along with their neighbours in this "levelled society" (69), they soon moved to a backwoods farm near Peterborough where, although physical conditions were much worse, they were surrounded by "a substantial group of friends and family" (66) who agreed with the Moodies' ideas of how society ought to be arranged. Yet even here a transplanted English social structure failed to take hold, and with the rebellion of 1837, "the catalyst releasing them from the settler's life" (74), the Moodies moved to Belleville. Once again they were disappointed. Although J.W.D. Moodie obtained a prestigious job "through their connection to the old order" (74), the Moodies did not fit in with the local Tories who tended to be Canadian-born Loyalists. Moreover, the Moodies' own political position began to shift with the move so that "they ended up with an orientation apparently the opposite of the one they had previously occupied" (75). Thurston notes that "the extremes at both ends of the political spectrum withered" (80) during the first twenty years Moodie spent in Canada; Moodie "reluctantly accepted the values she found dominant around her" (82), but "retained her conservatism even when she adopted some reform principles" (82). While Thurston plausibly argues that Moodie clung to English conservatism, seeking to transplant an English social system with which she felt comfortable into the New World, he has already established that Moodie voluntarily followed a "downward social trajectory" in England. If we allow the earlier arguments, then, we must ask with what social system she identifies and to what system she is clinging in Canada. The groundwork of the last three chapters in Thurston's text shifts even as it is being laid.

Chapter Five deals with Moodie's Canadian writing—poetry and prose—up to the time of *Roughing It in the Bush*. Throughout this early Canadian work, she

looks back to an "idealized homeland" (83): "England haunts her writing as the lost ideal, the desired object, only because she had left it. The colony, as the real, suffers in comparison. She wrote to reclaim the ideal and preserve it from the real" (83). This orientation shows up in poems where she expresses her unhappy reaction to Canada ("Oh Canada! Thy Gloomy Woods" and "Home Thoughts of an Emigrant"). While in some poetry she "attempts to assimilate creatively the reality of the backwoods" (86), for the most part, "Canadian nature repels her" (85), thereby eliminating one of her favourite verse topics. Still, although the "alien landscape stifled Moodie, Upper Canadian politics opened an opportunity for writing in a familiar vein" (86), and with the Rebellion, she turned to patriotic poetry. Moodie disliked Mackenzie, since "[h]e attacked the British connection that she needed, for her own peace, to retain. The rebellion threatened her identity" (87). This makes a great deal of sense—in this chapter, if not in Thurston's text as a whole.

In the prose, as well as the poetry, Moodie relied on British models, recycling earlier work "pre-approved by a British audience" (90) and using European subject matter. Themes and pre-occupations are familiar: morality and money, the control of passions, spiritual as opposed to material wealth, the intervention of Providence to reward the worthy. In her fiction especially, Thurston says, Moodie plotted solutions to economic dilemmas similar to her own (95), once again using male characters to represent herself. While I would question Thurston's autobiographical insistence in his analysis of Moodie's fiction, the Canadian sketches in the *Victoria Magazine* and the *Literary Garland* which form the basis for *Roughing It in the Bush* more obviously connect with Moodie's own life. Thanks to the lack of conventional strictures governing the writing of a sketch, "she freed herself from the ideal so that she could confront realities around her" (103). This seems possible, yet did Moodie ever extricate herself from "the ideal"? Rather, did she not continue to judge the "realities" of Canada by setting them against a preconceived British ideal?

Chapter Six is an assortment of commentary on the six books by Moodie which were published between 1852 and 1855. There is a useful analysis of *Life in the Clearings*, but since much of Moodie's book publication of the period is derived from earlier periodical publications (and therefore mentioned in the previous chapter), the discussion tends towards redundancy. Strangely, Thurston stops at 1855, ignoring Moodie's later writing—although it is listed in the bibliography. It would be relevant to his thesis, surely, if he were to trace Moodie's struggle to impose order through language up to and including her last published work in the 1870s.

Thurston's examination of *Roughing It in the Bush* in Chapter Seven is generally strong, if taken alone; studied alongside preceding chapters, the arguments weaken. For example, Thurston begins by claiming that the driving force behind *Roughing It* is Moodie's "desire to wrest meaning from her earliest experiences of the colony" (133). If, as Thurston has suggested elsewhere, Moodie

had long since recognized the futility of employing words to "secure the safe haven she sought" (40), why did she try, at this late date, and with a wealth of failed attempts behind her, to "appropriate the colony for herself" (134)? When extrapolated, however, Thurston's ideas are worth serious consideration. He reminds us of the need to take into account the diversity and "contradictoriness" (134) of *Roughing It*—the multiple authors, the inclusion of previously published as well as new work, and the many editorial interventions. Thurston reads this as genre instability or even "genre collapse" (140); the traditional genres simply could not describe "the amorphous, democratic, vulgar Canadian experience" (140).⁵

Thurston contrasts the miscellany of the completed text to the various efforts by Moodie to order her material (chiefly her use of techniques more commonly found in fiction), including an interesting analysis of the dialogue in *Roughing It*. To begin with, since the dialogue was written long after the actual conversations had taken place (if, indeed, they ever did), it seems likely that the words come not from Moodie's memory, but rather from her imagination. In addition, she seems to use dialogue in an attempt to reveal character, as is the case with her Yankee neighbours. She reconstructs dialogue "to make characters complicit in the compromise of themselves" (141). Typically, a questioner forces the conversation, and the character "reveals his or her own failings" (141) in answering. And, in a sense, Moodie tries to "assimilate" or "subdue" the despised Yankees by "revealing their hypocrisy" (140) through their speech. Unwittingly, though, Moodie fails: "their discourses subvert hers" (141), and she exposes herself by silencing the tormentors in the same manner in which they torment her. She turns on her enemies, dominating them "with biblical citations and verbal aggression" (145) and, unintentionally and ironically, becomes "like the antagonist the scene criticizes" (144). Moreover, the characters come to life through dialogue, acting as "co-authors of the text in which they appear" (145): "The voices of the characters in *Roughing It* enter and speak with their own accents, their own emphases, and persist beyond the authorial attempt to silence them or devalue their words" (145).

Thurston says that the disliked Yankee characters speak through Moodie, despite her efforts to silence them. By way of contrast, the trio of gentlemen, Tom, Brian, and Malcolm, is internalized by Moodie: "They do not speak through her; she speaks through them, and their expressions of abandonment and madness resonate with her own" (146). Tom, Brian, and Malcolm are refined, artistic, and elitist products of the English class system; they are allowed to speak at length—and in Moodie's idiom—without interruption or interrogation; even though all are associated with crime or madness, she does not moralize; and that all are mad proves the words they speak "reverberate with her own fears of what she confronts" (149). Thus, Moodie's appropriation of dialogue (a technique of fiction intended to reduce her world to a manageable order), escapes her strict control, and reveals more than she had ever intended.

Thurston feels that the inadequacy of language, paradoxically, allows Moodie to capture the society around her; in her "inability to close the gaps" (166), she reveals "a land that could not be contained by any generic framework" (166):

Roughing It, in play between its various dualities, does not rest in any stable configuration. Its instability exposes it to dismemberment at the call of intentions foreign to itself. It is an installment in an incomplete serial writing project, not an achieved literary artefact, an open text, not a finished whole. It is one woman's attempt to write through a forest of oppositions and contradictions.

(165)

Elsewhere Thurston has identified as a "serial writing project" "Rachel Wilde," *Flora Lyndsay*, *Roughing It in the Bush*, and *Life in the Clearings*.⁶ But his autobiographical interpretation, valid in the case of these four works, weakens when it is stretched to accommodate all of the published work (or at any rate, the work until 1855). Furthermore, while he ventures some very interesting ideas, he renders them ineffectual by arguing an incompatible point of view several pages (or several chapters) later. The last word on Moodie's words remains to be written.

Notes

1. For a listing of most of the important Moodie criticism, see Thurston's bibliography. [\[back\]](#)
2. See D.M.R. Bentley, "Trees and Forest: Variety and Unity in Early Canadian Writing." *Literary Genres/ Les Genres litteraires*, eds. I.S. MacLaren and C. Potvin (Edmonton: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, U of Alberta, 1991) 19-30. Bentley discusses miscellany as a genre. [\[back\]](#)
3. See "A slight sketch of the early life of Mrs. Moodie by her sister Mrs. C.P. Traill" in the Traill Family Collection, Public Archives of Canada. [\[back\]](#)
4. See Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins, and Michael Peterman, eds. *Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985). [\[back\]](#)
5. For a different point of view, see Bentley, "Trees and Forest." [\[back\]](#)
6. John Thurston, Introduction, *Voyages: Short Narratives of Susanna Moodie*, by Susanna Moodie (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1991) vii-xxix. [\[back\]](#)

Elizabeth Thompson
