Pensées: Thoughts and Reflections

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2020 - 2022

First series of entries starting January 15, 2020 and continuing until February 25.
After that each entry will be individually dated

Thoughts and Reflections at times somewhat in the spirit of Pascal''s *Pensées*. **Note added in October 2021**: increasingly also short reviews of movies I have watched and of books (mostly novels) I have read for the first or second time, the latter always with more appreciation and insight.

My fundamental question: am I to believe that the Earth and humans are just a random blip in the galactic maelstroms of the cosmos or will I allow myself to be inspired by Teilhard de Chardin's sweeping vision of the evolution of life and humankind and its consummation in the Omega Point when God will be all in all? Yes, by God's Grace I will and will place it in the supreme context of Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God.

"The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." I read this well known and often quoted sentence in Pascal's *Pensées* for the first time in an undergraduate course on French literature of the seventeenth century, and now many decades later it makes an even deeper impression on me: Pascal penned his *Pensées* after his momentous awakening into an all-consumingly lived Christian faith, but his *cri de coeur* comes close to speaking of a universe without God. As for myself, even now there are moments it speaks very much to me.

Recently I have become even more appreciative of the great turn in Kant's philosophy (and so harshly satirized by Nietzsche) represented by his *Critique of Practical Reason,* which argues that we have no choice but to turn to religious faith—Christianity's of course in the western world —in order to satisfy the fundamental existential needs that we find within ourselves—above all, to see true justice done by a Higher Power for the suffering innocents and to live on beyond our inevitable mortality. We humans still search for the ultimate meaning in our lives, and those of us who find it, even if it is not defined by the traditional religiosity put forward by Kant, will be sustained by it. This was the supreme truth that dawned on Viktor Frankl in Auschwitz, as he later wrote about it in his *Man's Search for Meaning* (the English rendering of the original German title, which translated is *Despite Everything Saying Yes to Life*).

A half century since the height of the publicity surrounding him and twenty-nine years since his death on the last day of 1980, Marshall McLuhan had become in my mind a distant memory. In the 60's, I had been only superficially familiar with his ideas through aphoristic snippets from his talks and writings, but finally, over the past two weeks, I have been delving into some of his

most iconic writings, in particular *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* which is my favourite, as well as the comments by his critics, both positive and negative, and last, but not least, Philip Marchand's superb biography. McLuhan is indeed prone to hyperbole, too cavalier with the facts, and often outlandish in his generalizations and theorizing, not to speak of his reactionary Catholicism, which, however, he is for the most part successful in concealing in his public self. Even so, there are gems of insight in his "probes," and so his voice is more prophetic than ever in our age of the omnipresent digital technology, social media, and computing "in the clouds."

The forbidden fruit of my first year in university was not sex but Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. I tasted that fruit less than one year after my public confession of faith in the Wallaceburg Christian Reformed. Church. My first year at Western came indeed with a culture shock, but now many decades later it still causes me no regret. It was all a part of a lifetime of "faith seeking understanding," as it was so well expressed by St Augustine.

I have used the phrase "Higher Power" in an earlier paragraph because I find it both so simple and so full of reverence. At the age of fourteen I started to prefer it—wherever suitable—to "God" after I heard more than once one of my grade eight teachers using it.in class. How abused the word "God"
has been in so many languages over the centuries and millennia!

"The medium is the message": this is all-too-typical McLuhan hyperbole, easily refuted by comparing Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats and Adolf Hitler's ranting demagoguery, both sent out by radio-broadcast.

Yesterday was the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Soviet army. Was God—won't use "Higher Power" here—at Auschwitz, at the Holocaust? I remember reading of a boy in one of the death camps who said he saw God hanging from the gallows.

The biblical "Immanuel: God With Us": that's what that boy's paradox, terrifying but also most comforting, was all about. I am very much reminded of what Jesus said according to the Gospel of Matthew 10: 29: But not one of them [the sparrows] will fall on the ground without the Father." The boy caught the paradox of Jesus, God Incarnate, hanging on the cross.

Stream of consciousness: an apt phrase for the flow of our mental life—our sensory impressions, our feelings, our thoughts, our memories. Since so much of it is non-verbal, much of it inevitably eludes the written word unless these are framed by the narrator. James Joyce treats the reader to a tour-de-force performance in rendering stream of consciousness in his modernist masterpiece, *Ulysses*, but only, in my estimation, with partial success. In many episodes, we get only staccato phrases and sentences the meaning of which may not immediately grasped by the reader and where the same has to supply in his or her mind the connectivity in order to obtain the

'streaming' effect. Only in the final episode, "Penelope," where from the beginning to the very end dozens of pages of unpunctuated prose—completely without any framing by a narrator—in sentences that as it were flow into one another, the succession of Molly Bloom's feelings and memories is conveyed with a remarkable immediacy and totality: here indeed we ger the 'streaming' effect. Other masters of the modern novel such as Virginia Woolf—above all, in *The Waves*—and William Faulkner—here I am thinking especially of *Light in August*—resort to some sort of narratorial framing in order to capture the rich, sentient flow of human consciousness and do so magnificently. The nadir of no success whatsoever comes, in my judgment, in Samuel Becket's short novels—which I must confess I have read only in the English translation by the author from the original French—where many passages, even whole pages, as I endeavour to make sense of them, lose their already feeble thread of connectivity and descend to near-gibberish. The accolades bestowed by some critics—"every sentence is written as if it had been lived," "pure writing," "pushing at the outer skin of human existence," "the searing memories of the soul denied in vain"—strike me as absurd hyperbole..

I am sure there will be many more of my thoughts and reflections such as the previous one in dealing with a subject of literary study and appreciation. When a few years ago I decided to move away from scholarly writing aiming at eventual publication, I set myself a reading project that would be certain to occupy me for years and would focus mainly on the novel in the literature of the West. I would start with the early 19th century and then move into the 20th and possibly into the present. Part of my project would take me back to many works I had already read, but this would usually have been already decades ago and therefore these novels would be likely to benefit greatly from a fresh reading. I would confine myself largely to works written in languages in which I was fluent, namely English and Dutch, or at least quite proficient, that is, French and German, where I would not be altogether dependent on translations and would be able to form a just estimate of the quality of any translation I was using. As a classicist with my knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek I had already read the few novels that have survived from Greco-Roman antiquity, and my thoughts on these would also go into the mix of my now much wider reading. I set this ambitious project for myself in anticipation of the sheer enjoyment I would derive from this venture, while hoping that it would at the same time furnish me with plenty of new insights into what, so to speak, works and what does not—or at least not so well--in what became the absolutely overarching and dominant genre of literature of the West in the course of the 19th century.

Cyclothymia: I discovered that learned Greek-based word a few years ago; in common parlance, mood swings, a mild form of the manic-depressive disorder—bipolar is the more commonly used word now, preferred, I imagine, because it does not have the graphic bluntness of the older term. I do not regard cyclothymia or whatever else you want to call it as a psychologically disabling disorder but rather a part and parcel of state of a mental condition or temperament that is extremely common and can should be lived with without a heavy resort to medication. In my early 40's I myself did resort, on my doctor's advice, to a minimal dose of a popular antidepressant when I was going through a prolonged period of anxiety and depression. I am still taking it but I suspect it is working now largely as a placebo. Strangely enough, when some years ago I went off it on my own initiative I began to have difficulty in falling asleep and so I

went back on it. I think I have become a little more disposed to the condition over the past several years, but I believe that is a by-product, in my case at least, of the inevitable process of aging. In any case, I am successful in keeping a healthy overall perspective on it. A depressive phase is most likely to take hold of me when I wake early in the morning, but this is often a period of my best thinking since I get through it with reflection and meditation, and the feeling then wears off as the day progresses and I am likely to swing into a much more upbeat mood.

Some movies deserve a second or even more viewings. Thanks to Home Box Office I was able last night to watch the 1996 film, *Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, for a second time; the first time I had also seen it on television but that was quite a few years ago, and this time it had a much more of a stirring impact on me. Quite apart from the magnificent performances of the two star-crossed lovers by Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, I felt immersed gloriously in the visually stunning settings, both outdoors and indoors, in a large contemporary subtropical maritime city, American to be sure but with s strong Latino ambiance (Miami?), and equally, especially in the first part, in the flamboyant crowd scenes of hip hop music and dancing. The movie's script preserved lines and even sizable chunks of the Shakespearean text, especially in the dialogues of the major characters. I am somewhat ambivalent about this, however, since the archaism of these collide so sharply with the otherwise vividly contemporary language, slang and all—the street idiolect of the rival gangs, above all--of late 20th century America. I like to think the literary impact of this memorable movie might have been even greater if a contemporary speech-style, but one still echoing the majesties of Shakespeare's verbal splendour, had been used throughout; to create such a merging of the Shakespearean and the contemporary is truly a challenge worth taking on.

This evening—of the 19th of February—it is two weeks ago that the blockades of most of Canada's railways started. The response of the federal government to this national crisis has been tardy, weak, and thus far totally ineffectual. Does the Prime Minister remember that in October 1970 his dad invoked the War Measures Act over what turned out to be far less of a 'crisis?'

Yesterday, the 21st, Justin Trudeau announced there had been none of the dialogue that was so urgently needed between the two sides because of the obvious unwillingness of the protesters to engage in such and that therefore there was no sense in a further waiting so that, as the inevitable result, the blockages must be lifted "now." It was a very weak ultimatum since he did not specify the measures that would have to be taken by the different levels of government and the law enforcement agencies in such a scenario; he did say, however, there would be no resort to the army, Therefore, the comments I made in the previous entry on the pitiful inadequacy of the government's handling of the crisis continue to stand.

Omega Man: this 1971 science fiction movie with its stark dystopian story is one of the most compelling movies of its kind I have ever watched. I am pleased I was finally able to be totally absorbed by it thanks to Glenn's gift of a dvd. Charlton Heston as Neville, at the movie's

beginning apparently the only completely uninfected survivor of a global pandemic wrought by biological warfare, right away plays his role magnificently—as he does also in his other memorable science fiction and dystopian movies--- driving his flashy red convertible up and down the deserted streets of Los Angeles. At the end, he dies, crucified-like, with outstretched arms in a welter of blood at the hands of the sinister Matthias and his zombie-like followers, plague-infected humans all of them, but even so manages to pass on his unique gift of the healing serum he has created with his own blood to the small band of the still healthy humans he has stumbled upon, and thus he becomes a Christ-like figure, indeed now the ultimate Omega Man: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," as the risen and triumphant Christ speaks at the end of the Book of Revelation.

February 25

There is still mischief being done along the railway lines. Yesterday morning the Ontario Provincial Police cleared the major blockage site near Belleville and made ten arrests, but this morning there are reports of tire burnings on the rails there and elsewhere. In the House of Commons question period session there was the usual grandstanding on the side of both the opposition and the government. Scheer was basically right in his hammering on the rule of law and on the laxity and weakness of the
government in dealing with the crisis but went off topic with his other accusations, such as the government's supposed hobbling of the oil sector, and from Trudeau we got, as might be expected, the usual pious platitudes.

Antigone, a recent Québecois movie which was featured at last year's Toronto International Film Festival—I had the pleasure of watching it last night on HBO—is a stunningly contemporary and altogether transformational adaptation of Sophocles' classical tragedy. All the major characters keep the names of the Sophoclean originals but are, with the exception of the Haemon- and Creon-like characters, members of a refugee family and Antigone's temporarily successful scheme to rescue her brother Polynices from impending deportation propels her into the bureaucratic maze of the justice system. I was glad the plot does not develop along bleak lines: the public support Antigone wins is enormous—with the social media playing a crucial role here—Antigone and Creon enjoy an at least temporary togetherness as lovers, and the ending is ambiguous, the suggestion being that the heroine and her family will be returning—but not deported—to their war-torn homeland.

Something really drew my ire in the preview of the next issue of *The Gay and Lesbian Review* which I received online this morning. This issue will focus on forms of sexual and gender nonconformity which are little known and studied such as autoeroticism (as distinguished from self-masturbation which is driven by other-directed erotic fantasies) and non-binary gender identification (or in traditional parlance, androgyny) in contrast to those which are very much, or at least much more, out in in the open and are now commonly identified collectively by acronyms. By far the best known of the latter is LGBTQ but much lengthier ones have been devised, and even an eleven-letter monstrosity is put forward. I say "monstrosity" quite deliberately: who in his /her right mind would want to use such a hideously straggling identifier,

whether orally or in writing? It suggests a linguistic concoction devised by a mad cataloguer. In fact, I argue that the current all too common resort to acronyms for the sake of an ever-illusive inclusivity and precision is ultimately dehumanizing. Let's stick as much as possible to widely accepted designation by word alone: lesbian women, gay men (instead, of course, of "homosexuals"), bisexual men and women, transgendered persons, and so forth, always keeping in mind that certain historically or culturally specific contexts will require the use of other, more suitable words.

February 26

Early this morning, in view of the threatening coronavirus pandemic, our sluggishly acting, ineffeetual federal government, and the half-madman in charge south of the border, I could not help but think of Yeats's 1919 poem, "The Second Coming." On reflection, though, this was much too despairing: consider one supposed parallel that comes to mind, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19, which killed no less than tens of millions of people world-wide, 50,000 in Canada alone.

February 27

I have just finished reading for the first time, Evelyn Waugh's, *Brideshead Revisited*, which received a highly praised television treatment in the 1980's that I, too, enjoyed greatly. Considering Waugh's other novels, which I have not read, but which, I understand, cemented Waugh's reputation throughout decades of his writing career as being a social and political reactionary, I am pleasantly surprised. This is an accomplished novel in every respect—description of milieu, characterization, and overarching everything else, a superbly nuanced prose style—that by itself should ensure Waugh's reputation. His non-judgmental portrayal of gay and bisexual men alone, above all the narrator, Charles Ryder, and his lover, during their years at Oxford University, Sebastian Flyte, and the incomparably flamboyant and articulate Anthony Blanche, together with the depiction of the social and cultural milieus in which they moved, such as 1920's Oxford, and briefly but strikingly, the gay underground of 1930's London, makes this novel unique in English literature of the 1940's-50's, even in comparison with Mary Renault's *The Charioteer*.

February 28

HBO has just brought me another great recent movie, *The White Crow*. The "white crow" is Rudolph Nureyev, the Russian superstar ballet dancer who in May1961 at the age of 22 defected to the west. The story's gravity point is Nureyev's defection which took place in Paris but much of the movie is taken up by flashbacks which take us from his childhood to his years with the Kirov Ballet company in Leningrad. The Paris and Saint Petersburg settings are filmed sumptuously. The Ukrainian Oleg Ivenko is utterly convincing in the role of Nureyev—although I see that some critics feel his egocentric and flamboyant personality, so at odds with Soviet state ideology, should have been more conspicuously brought out --and his dancing sequences are breathtaking. It was a pleasant surprise for me to see Ralph Fiennes (who also directed the movie and was a co-producer) in the major supporting role of Nureyev's mentor, Alexander Pushkin, at the Kirov Ballet; there is, in my judgment, in his role a slight undertone which suggests that he,

although married, is, like his protégé, gay. Indeed, all the supporting roles are played with authenticity and distinction.

March 1

Eagerly awaited by me for months, Handel's opera, *Agrippina,* its performance live-streamed yesterday from the NY Met to the local cineplex simply a blast. I had known in advance it was to be performed in modern dress, but I still had no idea how far and well the contemporary transformation would be carried in this ultra-topical opera of: vaulting ambition, Machiavellian scheming and plotting, with a generous dollop of sex added, and all of this embodied by and dead-on centred in Agrippina as brilliantly acted and sung by Joyce Didonato, the "Bad Girl" supreme, as she said herself in the intermission interview. The young Nero was superbly acted by Kate Lindsey, who put all her energy and bravura—even snorting cocaine at one point —into her role of "a male sociopath," as she put it in her interview. For once, I thoroughly enjoyed the frequent coloratura in the singing, and the continual outpouring of glorious baroque music carries the intricate plot forward with vigour and momentum.

March 3

I must also record my response to the character of Ottone (the Italian version of his Latin name, Otho), played and sung by Iestyn Davies. He is the Roman general who saves Claudius from shipwreck and drowning and is rewarded by the grateful emperor by being named his successor. Slight of build, almost tremulous of voice, at times even whiny, he has nothing of Roman military machismo about him, and at the end he gladly sacrifices the throne in order to gain his beloved Poppaea. Like the others, he is a real historical person but his story, also like that of the others, is completely fictitious. He does not appear prominently in the historical record until many years later as the second emperor in the so-called Year of the Four Emperors, dying in battle after a reign of only a few months. Suetonius speaks of his supposed effeminacy and physical vanity—which may have inspired Handel and his librettist to portray him as he appears in the opera.

March 7

I take back the harsh words I wrote a few weeks ago about Justin Trudeau's handling of the blockades crisis. In retrospect, his moderate, conciliatory response turned out to be the right one. However, I still maintain it was much too slow in coming.

March 10

My "thoughts and reflections" are going back a lot to movies these days. Three compelling movies I have watched over the past few days: the first two, both very recent, are courtesy of HBO, the third is brought by Turner Classic Movies. In the first two, same-sex erotic attraction is central to the story but is played out very differently. *The Life and Death of John Donovan*, a fictional story directed by the precociously famous Xavier Dolan, takes us into the relationship, which unfolds entirely through correspondence, between an eleven-year old precociously gay boy and a popular, also gay—but semi-closeted—television actor. It is indeed a compelling story

told in some brilliant acting but is developed in, for my taste, a too muddled, even chaotic fashion. By contrast, *Vita and Virginia*, which follows the emotionally complex romance between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf, does not hesitate to portray the at times passionate physicality of their relationship, but the story-line as a whole unfolds in a linear lucidity. My only caveat is that the actress who acts the role of Virginia, and does so magnificently, is actually far too young to portray the middle-aged iconic novelist, but, maybe, the viewer is invited to see her arresting beauty simply through the entranced eyes of her lover. I give a great *kudos* to *A Night to Remember*, the 1956 British-made movie about the Titanic disaster, which I have just seen for the first time. Although I am sure it cost far less to make than its 1996 successor its production values are impressive, for the sinking of the great ocean-liner is followed with awesome physical precision. I like the fact that the tragedy is played out across a wide social spectrum of passengers and crew members—appearing numerous brief scenes-- in striking contrast to the later movie where the briefly blossoming romance of the two lovers played by Leo DiCaprio and Kate
Winslet becomes the story's central focus.

March 20

As we move into the start of spring, the grim ramifications of the Covid-19 crisis are making themselves more and more felt. My last few days in Toronto already made this painfully clear. I wrote yesterday to my sisters Ingrid and Sylvia, who had just returned from their respective winter vacations, which they had cut short by a few days, I could not find a better place in Canada to sit out the pandemic and the societal shutdown which has come with it. Even so, the shutdown is in force here, too. I have begun the question, though, its severity: it seems to me now the overall response has been too draconian. Most of all, ultra-strict social isolation or distancing does not make sense to me except for persons who actually show the symptoms; if they are mild, which they are in the vast majority of cases, such an individual should sit it out at home for about two weeks and keep their distance, as much as possible, from the other members of their household. If someone has health issues that make for an increased likelihood to develop a serious illness, the staying at home should last as long as the pandemic is around. If an infected person does become seriously ill, hospitalization will of course be necessary. All others should exercise common-sense prudence with regard to cleanliness, disinfecting, and avoiding crowds. The authorities should certainly enact and enforce strict measures to prevent crowding in public places and many —perhaps the majority-- of these venues should be shut down altogether, but the lockdown does not have to be as severe as it is now.

My long-time friend Terry in West Vancouver, with whom I had a telephone chat last night, sharply disagrees with what he considers my excessive leniency. I did not argue with him, for he has the pre-existing conditions that make for a much greater vulnerability to becoming seriously ill and I fully empathize with his adoption of the severe rigour he has imposed on his daily life-style.

For some time already I have been putting the current crisis in some sort of historical perspective: the Covid-19 pandemic is and will be nothing like the plague that ravaged much of Eurasia in the 14th century when some countries and regions saw one-third to one-half of their populations perish, or more recently, the great HiNi flu pandemic--the so-called Spanish flu-- in

1919-18 which may have cost up to 30 million lives around the world, 50,000 deaths in Canada alone. Would that the media and all the powers that be remind, over and over again, the public of this fundamental fact.

March 22

A lighter touch now, entertainment for anyone who wants relief from the relentless Covid-10 news cycle: I am referring to the movie which I saw last night on HBO, *The Dead Are Not Dead*, an obvious spoof of the 1968 horror classic, *Night of the Living Dead.* However, "spoof" is a somewhat misleading word as it suggests something uncomplicatedly comedic. With its far superior production values, above all its impressive computer-generated special effects—all those hundreds of zombies springing up from the nocturnal graveyard--its moments of serious acting, and its melancholy and spooky theme-song, this movie is a far cry from its rock-bottom cheaply made, amateurish predecessor. The words "zombie apocalypse," exclaimed by one of the characters in the midst of the escalating mayhem, would indeed make a fitting alternative title for this striking movie, which straddles both the horror-deep and the ridiculous-sublime. Even an extraterrestrial element is introduced in the person of the eerie Buddha-devotee woman who has taken over the local funeral home and who with a her formidable, almost scythe-like sword shows herself an expert in the deft decapitation of numerous of the undeads.

March 24

Very topically, HBO has just included the 2011 movie *Contagion* in its selection to watch. I watched it last night. Stellar cast and acting, heart-pounding tempo, and very disturbing, bringing forward startling parallels with the current pandemic. Maybe I should have stayed away from it: I am sure it was at least partially responsible for the restless anxiety dreams I had later.

March 28

Did some reading online on the so-called Spanish (more correctly now H1N1) flu pandemic now of 1918-19. Scary stuff! Interesting that the pandemic may very well have started in the U.S. Incredible incompetence there then—not only the tardiness of response but even, misrepresentation, outright lying, and what should be called criminal risk-taking --on the part of government and public health authorities, with the inevitable result of much, much higher numbers of fatalities. This time, thank God, thanks above all the stellar advances in medical science and public health policies and practices over the past century the prospects are not as dire. Even the erratic performance of Mr Trump in this crisis –how infinitely better is our own Mr Trudeau! --cannot undo this fact.

March 30

I chanced upon a fascinating online paper yesterday, "Coming to Grips with the Implications of Quantum Mechanics," (authored by three reputable scientists in quantum physics) which, in my thinking, takes us into the hallowed realm of metaphysics, although the scientists make it very clear they are not dishing out mysticism, and brings significantly closer to each other the ancient Stoic and Epicurean views—seemingly so diametrically opposed—on ultimate reality: that

ultimate reality is indeed Mind (according to the Stoics: cf. what Anchises reveals to Aeneas about the cosmic generative powers of *Mens* in book 6 of Vergil's *Aeneid*, and not to forget the monism of the Hindu philosopher Shankara), but that Mind also accommodates randomness and indeterminacy (cf. Epicurus' and Lucretius' unpredictable swerve of the atoms). In the Christian worldview, of course, that ultimate being takes a stupendous personal turn in his revelation of himself as our God and Father (with his aspect as our Mother also now coming increasingly into my view), the loving Father of his Son Jesus Christ.

March 31

It is not very often that a movie I watched helps to settle a question which has been on my mind for a long time. Such was *Mary Shelley*, a recent British movie I watched last week. The question was: did Mary Shelley really write *Frankenstein*, or was it the literary creation of her husband, Percy Shelley? Her authorship of this ground-breaking novel, a favourite on the reading lists of high school and university students, is pretty well universally accepted. It was questioned in depth, though, a few years ago by John Lauritsen--whom I know quite well and whose scholarship I greatly respect-- in his book, *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein*. He argued that the overall conception underlying and driving the story, in which he detected significant male homoerotic elements, as well as the novel's richly accomplished style pointed to a mature literary artist at the height of his creative powers, namely Percy Shelley, not his wife, the still teenaged Mary. Lauritsen also judges that Mary's later novels, written after Percy's death, show little by way of literary skill and luminous ideas,

In her own words, as quoted in two recent scholarly works, *Mary Shelley* by Angela Wright and *Classical Horror: Historical Explorations of Literature* by Anne Delong, Mary always showed that she had no qualms about admitting to the ample assistance she received from Percy in shaping and perfecting her style. I have read one of Mary's later novels, the dystopian *The Last Man*, the story, mainly set in England although it traverses much of Europe, of how a gradually spreading plague drives all of known humanity to extinction, and I give it high marks for its narrative pace, its vividly drawn characters, and its arresting descriptions of nature and milieu. The numerous quotations from and allusions to past literature, both classical and non-classical, attest to the astonishingly high level of the education she enjoyed as a girl and young woman in early 19th century England.

The movie clinched Mary's authorship of *Frankenstein* for me at a scene towards the end: the book has just been published in 1818, but anonymously, and just about everyone assumes Percy is the author, but surrounded by admirers, he sets them right: Mary is the author; and she, standing outside the circle, overhears, and takes it in joyfully. This almost certainly is a fictitious scene, but, combining it with the known facts, I trust its essential message.

April 1

Yesterday, backed up by his Task Force on the pandemic and addressing the nation, Trump, for a change, sounded rational and focused—relying heavily, of course, on his prepared text (from which he at times reads only haltingly)—and showed empathy. Still, it is amazing that the federal response to the crisis still seems muddled: T. has invoked the National Defense Act, sort of, but

incredibly, the individual states and FEMA are still bidding, that is, competing with each other, for medical and surgical supplies: furor capitalistus numquam deficiens.

April 6

The Internet is rife with conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic. My friend Terry has sent me the text of one of these: the pandemic was deliberately set into motion by the Chinese government in order to weaken the West, especially the United States, with the view of ensuring China's final hegemony in much of, or even in all of, the world. In its ruthlessness towards achieving this goal, the government was willing to sacrifice the lives of thousands of its own citizens in the city of Wuhan from which the pandemic was to spread across the world. This theory makes one—including myself— sit up and pay attention because it puts forward a good amount of indisputably factual information, including the fact that somehow the pandemic did not spread—was not allowed to spread?-- to the rest of China. All the same, I agree with my friend that this is pure, outrageous speculation.

April 7

China must pay for its mishandling, in fact for its initial attempt to cover up the emergence and spread of the virus in Wuhan: such was the mantra yesterday evening of Tucker Carlson and his guest on Fox News: this colossal s malfeasance will cost the world trillions of dollars, so let's start with the trillion dollars the US owes China since that country holds that amount in US government bonds. What about the recklessness of the Trump government in denying the seriousness of the pandemic until well into March?

April 12

Easter Sunday: A brilliant sunny day but with a stiff cold wind from the west; however, I still got a lot of enjoyment out of my (almost daily now) two walks. I finished reading, Doris Lessing's 1962 novel, *The Gold Note-Book*, but much of it engaged me far less than her 1952 novel *Martha Quest* and her 1969 *The Four-Gated City*. I can appreciate why Anna, the central character, a divorced but still youngish middle-class woman living with her daughter in 1950's England might experience such endless tumults of angst trying to find a balance between her determination to maintain her sense of personal autonomy and her deep-seated need for physical and emotional closeness with her current lover, but I find her drawn-out 'agony and ecstasy' internal monologues in this respect unconvincing. However, I suppose critics of almost 60 years ago were bound to find their psychology and literary art startlingly innovative. I would have liked to have a lot more of her increasing doubts about her membership in the Communist Party of England — from which she finally resigns—and about the official communist ideology, still heavily Stalinist until well into the 50's. Her initially very good but then deteriorating relationship with Ivor, her gay tenant, after he moves his blatantly effeminate lover Ronnie into his room, also leaves a bit of a sour note, although to Anna's credit she later arrives at the realization that there is an element of homosexuality in all of us.
Chris has lent me the much acclaimed 1978 German novella *Das Fliehende Pferd* by Martin Walser (it was made into a movie). So far I have only browsed through it, but I am encouraged

by Chris as well as by the psychologically acute passages that have already struck me to read it more closely.

April 13

I have had a lot of weird dreams lately, and it seems that since the beginning of the virus pandemic they've gotten even weirder. Not of single of them is what I'd call a nightmare, although some of them were probably disguised anxiety dreams. Dreams looking back to Scott, some of them exquisitely happy ones, have become less common over the past few years. Many of my dreams bring up travel, especially to the west coast (Vancouver and Vancouver Island), where I have spent so much time since the mid-70's.; they are almost invariably very enjoyable, although I seem have difficulty at times getting my directions. Anxiety dreams involving Acadia University in which I can't find my office or realize near the end of the term I have forgotten to teach a course or have difficulty getting hold of my computer are less common now. I have also had dreams about my student years in which I have forgotten or deliberately neglected to attend classes. Last night's dream was set in North Korea, and I was one of the many curious visitors to that still Stalinist-style totalitarian country. I even got to meet the young dictator, who was surrounded by admiring mistresses, all of them from western countries. There was a kind of souvenir shop also selling edible wares like canned fish Getting from South to North Korea necessitated a walk through many winding hallways and finally across an overhead walkway; the walk back to the South was the more perilous, for I remember a visitor might then find himself or herself arrested. At one point it seemed war with the U.S. was going to break out, but a hasty visit by Kim Jun Un to America—I accompanied him—prevented it. I should reread Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* to make sense of all this.

April 14

I was wise yesterday to turn off the news and the tv last night shortly after 10 pm and spend the next 40 minutes or so reading from the Bible. As a result I fell asleep easily and relaxed. I will make this my practice from now on. I had again a strange vivid dream but one that was on the whole very upbeat with only a few moments of anxiety as it merged my years and the people I knew in Wallaceburg many decades ago with my life and the people I know in Nova Scotia, and featured a lavish if bizarrely served banquet which epitomized this coming together. For the time in some months, Scott emerged on the scene, movie-star-like but at the same time a restless worldwide wanderer. My former colleague Barry Moody turned out as a great benefactor of both him and myself.

April 15

Another strange dream, a quite pleasant one indeed, and it must have been prompted by the discussion Chris and I carried on last evening about the Goethe Institute in Toronto. My dream had it that the young queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, shortly after her accession to the throne in 1898, had established a centre for the study of literature. Its location was right on the grounds of her place. It offered three courses, taught in succession on the same day of the week, so that students could be encouraged to take all three of them. The courses were free, and any interested adult could register, including natives of the Dutch colonies; when I registered I was

pleasantly surprised how many of them were among those who joined. One of the courses was to be a study of Euripides' *Bacchae*; I wonder if that detail in my dream was prompted by the fact that I had recently noted a new commentary on and translation of that masterpiece of tragic drama. I suppose what I experienced was a classic example of a wish fulfilment dream. That it included Dutch royalty—I saw the queen standing on the balcony of her palace and waving to the public—can be easily explained by my continuing interest in the House of Orange-Nassau and the central role it has played in the history of the Dutch nation over the past four-and-a-half centuries.

April 16

Terrible problems since yesterday with accessing the University network for email; the internet connection as a whole has also been slow and erratic for browsing and accessing websites, but it seems basically to work. Chris has been of tremendous help, putting in more than three hours of his own time; I can't be enough grateful to him. Maybe it is time for this more than seven-year old computer to be replaced, or less drastically and expensively, to be fitted out with hardware that will increase its capacity. Waiting now for someone from Eastlink to check the cable connections outside later this afternoon, but I doubt the problem lies there.

April 19

The Eastlink technician did come on Thursday three days ago but did not solve the problem. He would not come in—the Covid-19 scare etc., Eastlink policy—so in fact he was unable to diagnose and just offered vague generalities, It was, not surprisingly, Chris, who finally made the correct diagnosis: the trouble was caused by a newly malfunctioning modem, which had to be replaced. The new modem was delivered by a second technician on Friday morning and installed by Chris, whom I had to call to come in at the last moment since, again, the technician would not come in, and I am all thumbs when it comes to this sort of thing. Everything works beautifully now; Chris even opened up the Wifi alternative for possible use by myself in the future. I did not hesitate to report my displeasure with Eastlink in the survey they sent me yesterday.

April 20

Like all Nova Scotians and Canadians, I am stunned by the horror of the drawn-out killing spree that that took place less than a two-hour car ride from here. The killer was a prosperous middle-aged middle-class man supposedly well liked by some who knew him. Will his motivation ever be fathomed or will we have to say that he was taken possession of by a unfathomable drive to do pure evil? I am just about to finish reading William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, but the barbarism to which the boys in this novel descend is understandable in the context of the story. Golding comes closer, I think, in what he wrote elsewhere about the human propensity to evil: evil comes as naturally to man as the honeybee makes honey.

April 23

Nova Scotians and especially the victims' families are rightly dismayed and angry by the RCMP's failure to send out a timely emergency alert by radio, television, and above all by telephone by early last Sunday morning; if they had done so, many lives would undoubtedly have been saved. The explanations, or rather excuses, made by the chief superintendent of the Nova Scotia RCMP at the press conference yesterday were lame and utterly unconvincing and reveal an upper brass ultimately responsible for this debacle which I would not hesitate to call quite incompetent in their handling of this crisis. Another thought, this one pertaining to the Covid-19 situation, has been crossing my mind over the past few days. With residents dying like flies of the Covid-19 virus in the so-called long-term care facilities—they used to be called nursing homes—it is high time that the government or (provincial) governments should intervene and de-privatize these institutions and put them under public, non-profit governance, just like hospitals.

April 24

Series of strange dreams last night involving family, friends, and Acadia. Nothing special really except a dream in which Scott said he wanted out of our relationship, saying he was enticed by me into a homosexuality that deep down he didn't really want. This hit me hard since I've wondered myself whether we rushed way too fast into a full flown romantic relationship in which sex played a major role.

April 30

I am beginning to believe that the plethora of strange dreams—reflecting motives of both anxiety and wish fulfilment-- I have been having for quite a few weeks now are brought on by my ongoing mental processing of the pandemic crisis. While I have no reason to be concerned for my physical and financial health, the overall worldwide situation, especially that south of the border, is for me deeply troubling. I think I do not overdo my taking in the news but I do not wish to isolate myself either from what is going on. Thank God, I have access to several excellent reliable sources of news, both on television and online. The U.S. is certainly in huge trouble. Some days ago I read online an opinion piece—which I thought was admirably factual and analytical—which spoke of the U.S. as going in the direction of becoming a failed state. It appears to me the sober, unnerving truth, and if the U.S. goes down, Canada, though we are doing a much better job in handling the crisis in just about every respect, will go down with its mighty southern neighbour. Deus servet nos omnes!!!

May 3

I had a dream of pure wish fulfilment last night. A small boat cruise to the far north: just nine people, passengers and crew. Starting poiut, St Johns, a very handsome city, very Dutch-like, The highlight of the trip came when a huge whale snuggled alongside the boat and allowed us to walk on him / her.
Many times I have read advertisements for such trips with great pleasure and anticipation. They are expensive, but maybe some day…!

May 5

It is very telling that all across Canada the majority of persons—the very large majority of people, in fact, in some, as in Quebec and my province, who have died of the virus, were residents of a long-term care facility or, as they used to be called less euphemistically, a nursing home. Many of these places had already shown themselves beforehand to be unable to provide the quality care their residents needed and deserved. I am even more convinced now that these privately owned, for profit institutions must go, and their services put under the direct authority of provincial governments, with a much greater reliance on home care or small, home-like residences like the one my friend Peter is in. Our country can and should do much better for our elderly; and this shift should apply to all those who are physically or mentally handicapped and can no longer live by themselves.

May 6

Today my mood swings—or cyclothymia—swung heavily, too heavily, into the depressive phase, which has lasted, very unusually, all day, although now that it is evening it is much faded in comparison with its almost acute physical distress early this morning when I was doing my laundry and a seemingly erratic washer threw me into a real tizzy. What an absurd overreaction! I don't even remember how old the washer is: it must be at least fifteen years old and so is probably due for replacement, although Chris promised he'd have a look at it when he drops by later this evening. He says he has a an almost mechanic's way with such appliances. My recollection may be faulty but my depression today seems the worst I've had in months, maybe even years: in fact, I had an uncannily vivid recollection earlier today of a similarly bad depression I experienced exactly forty years ago—in May 1980—when I was living with Scott in our bungalow on Sherwood Drive in Wolfville. I trust that a good night's sleep will get me off to a much better start tomorrow.

May 7

Yes, today was much better.

May 12

I learned from Aljazeera today that in the Netherlands elderly persons who are severely ill with the Covid-19 virus may be given the option of letting themselves be euthanized instead of going into a UCI unit. Hard to believe, but from the seniors interviewed this does seem to be the case. It was also mentioned, although a person saying this publicly was nor identified, that some Dutch believe that the elderly should be willing to "sacrifice" themselves for the good of the younger generations. Holland is well known or, perhaps, notorious for having the most liberal policy of euthanasia in the world. ----------

May 14

Very strange dreams over the last two nights: family and friends, each one, as it were, both young and old, at get-togethers such as a dinner and a bus tour. The strangest get-together was of my brothers and sisters plus myself at our row house on the Abel Tasmanstraat; both the house and the street as a whole looked at once strange and familiar, and there were apartment buildings now in addition to the row houses (actually, this is how the neighbourhood at present looks like). Mom served dinner to us; I don't remember dad being there. The most recent dream was about my being with a long-time friend who was mourning for his partner, a transwoman: she had just been arrested and executed by the government. We swore revenge and formed a resistance cell. We needed money and made plans to rob a bank, but not for money but for gold. We hijacked an empty streetcar—in Toronto?—and then the dream ended, as far as I can remember.

The reading and study project may be coming to an end within the next few months; I still have to fill some gaps in my covering of 20th century British and French novels, but certainly not Marcel Proust's, *Remembrance of Things Past*, of which I have read snippets, also in the original French, enough to give me the flavour, but I wanted no more. It was a pleasure recently to read a lot more of Virginia Woolf than I did in my undergraduate years, and also to delve into the novels of Günter Grass, one of which I read entirely in the original German; and thanks to Chris, I was introduced to Grass's notable contemporary, Martin Walser; again, I read two compelling novels of his in the original German. I am thinking that, after I am finished filling in the gaps in my current project, I may turn back to Greek and Latin literature; there are a lot of authors there I should read more of, especially works of prose.

May 19

A strange dream again: Gary Vellek, who went on permanent disability in 1988 and died some years ago in a Toronto institution, re-emerged well and very much alive into Classics at Acadia, charming, very self-confident even imperiously so, and very harsh indeed to two students whom he refused to fly from (Dutch?) Guyana (!) back to Nova Scotia in a plane he piloted (I was one of the more favoured passengers.

Have dipped into Alexandre Dumas's *The Prisoner in the Iron Mask*. I was not interested in the twists and turns of final adventures of The Three Musketeers, who are almost seniors now, but can appreciate they must have been great fare for French readers in the mid-19th century. The portrait of the young Louis XIV transformed into the supreme autocrat of the French nation is dead-on, though. I see now that the Hollywood movie with Leonardo DiCaprio totally mispresents the book.

Have read much more slowly, *The Future Lasts Forever*, the memoir of Louis Althusser: it is very troubling certainly but also fearlessly honest, although I am inclined to believe he exaggerates his womanizing and adulteries. More seriously, I cannot for the world see why his mother, neurotic as she undoubtedly was, could have had such a devastating impact on his personal growth, driving him, so he accuses her, into a permanent state of mental "castration." The memoir's most interesting part for myself is Althusser's development over the years as a Marxist thinker especially since his final years coincided with the disintegration of the Soviet Union: he came to insist on far less ideologizing and, much like Gramsci, on far more attention to concrete historical facts and socio-political structures.

The next few weeks I'll be occupied with six French novels and one collection of short stories, all from the 20th century, two by Nobel Prize winning authors, Mauriac and Camus.

May 21

A succession of brilliant sunny days with rising temperatures. Transcendent far above the pandemic, this year's spring comes with a joyful face that is a miracle to immerse myself in as I take my daily walks. Already several weeks ago I was delighted by the crocuses, tiny but pretty as they always are. Then as the weeks progressed the grass began to reawaken to its springtime's lush green and the yellow blaze of the forsythias and the daffodils' pristine yellow leapt into my eyes, all this crowned just now by the tulips in all their diverse-coloured splendour. And how can I possibly look down on dandelions in all their profusion of rich yellow as undesirable weeds? Deciduous trees sport their still tiny leaves of light-tinted green in contrast to the dark green of the evergreens. The purple of the lilacs is beginning to beckon, and I am looking forward to the abundant flower-clusters of the rhododendrons that will enchant in early summer.

May 25

I have already expressed my feelings to a couple of friends who fully agree with me, but I must also register them in this way. Two issues. First of all, I am glad the leaders of our province's two opposition parties have voiced their displeasure with the way the premier has been handling the pandemic crisis in his recent addresses to Nova Scotians; the leader of the NDP rightly called the premier's words "patronizing" and "paternalistic," and the leader of the Conservatives was correct in chiding him for being vague, even evasive about the government's plan for easing the current restrictions, especially as they apply to the business community. I would add that the chief medical officer of our province was notably inept in his last communication, in particular in the careless way he brought forward a new, expanded list –totally unnecessary anyway at this stage—of the symptoms of the Covid-19 virus. From my own observations, I would say that residents in the other provinces are served much better by their respective premiers and chief medical officers.

Then there is Facebook. Last night I watched a documentary on this worldwide, hugely popular social medium on the Al Jazeera news network which confirmed my worst criticisms, namely that Facebook has allowed itself to become the world's most potent conduit and disseminator of hate speech and malicious disinformation while also catering to the perverse voyeuristic instincts of many of its users. Its department of "moderators," which was set up to scrutinize and if necessary delete the most offensive material, is still not doing an adequate job, and promises of improvement, all the way up from Mark Zuckerberg, are not convincing. One has to remember that Facebook is probably the most profitable cash cow in the world, a triumph of capitalism going rogue.

May 28

It looks like that within the next month I will have come to the end of the reading and study project on the 19th and 20th century novel in western literature. For the past ten days or so I have

been filling the gaps in my first-hand knowledge of the French novel and, with only a historical novel written by Jean-Christophe Rufin and published in 1998 left, that part of my project will have been completed. Prior to starting my project about three years ago, there were a lot of gaps in my reading of the French novel: some Victor Hugo I had read, Stendhal's, *The Red and the Black*, Malraux's Man's Fate, quite a bit of Gide, Camus's *The Outsider* (entirely in the original French) and had also dipped into Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, even reading some passages in *Swann's Way* in the original French, but had soon tired of tired of it and decided not to go back to it—I may still go against that decision in the future. It was a wonderful experience to give Hugo's *Les Misérables* a new and far more thoughtful reading; I must still go through some of it in the original French. Stendhal's and Malraux's masterpieces I read so long ago that they deserved a second reading and I am grateful I went back to them. I had never read Camus' *The Plague* and am so happy now I finally did: this is truly one of the great novels of the 20th century, and will want to read it in the original French.

Having read many decades ago Nietzsche's savage pillorying of her in his *Twilight of The Idols*, I finally read—I should have done it far sooner—four of George Sand's novels partially in translation and partially in the original French. She may be hardly read now, and then only by specialist scholars, but even if her language is often stilted and rhetorical by later standards of realism—in this respect she is quite inferior to her almost namesake contemporary, George Eliot—in the final analysis, the deeply felt humanity with which she invests many of her characters such as Indiana and Monsieur Sylvestre made her novels worth reading in my eyes.

Colette and Françoise Sagan have, as far as I can see now, rounded out my reading of female French authors. There must be many more who deserve to be read, and I hope I will have the opportunity to do so in the future. Of Colette I read only a collection of short stories, some of which, though, have the length and complexity to come close to being considered novellas. A thoroughly feminine author she is and not afraid to touch upon subjects still controversial in the 1930's and '40's: crossdressing (male to female), abortion, and a beautifully sensitive male-homoerotically coloured ending to " The Rendezvous." I love the *joie de vivre* that animates Sagan' s memoir, *With Fondest Regards*, with her vivid and thoughtful recollections of such notables as Billie Holliday, Orson Welles, Rudolph Nureyev, and Jean-Paul Sartre; she is thoroughly contemporary with our age.

François Mauriac won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the early 1950's, so I had great expectations of him before reading his very short novel—a novella really—*Of the Loved and the Unloved*. The story is pure melodrama which is also—and this I consider at least a plus—a tragicomedy. I'll remember it most for its portrayal of the romantic friendship between Gilles and Nicolas, obviously completely homoerotic on Nicolas's part. Another plus is the portrayal is its acidic portrayal of the fictional small "dead in life" provincial town where the story takes place. I'll have to read more of Mauriac in order to judge whether he was truly deserving of the grand Prize. The critical opinion I have read of this unvarnished Christian author is not altogether kind: misogynistic, sin-obsessed, etc.

-------June 3, 2020

Great to see on tv yesterday the big demonstration in Halifax: about 4000 people, non-white and white alike, turned out, and it was a peaceful protest. It should be a big step forward in the fight against racism in our province.

June 4

I am glad that at the last moment I added two authors, Georges Simenon and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Camus's *Les Justes*, to my survey of 20th century French novels; without these, it would have been seriously incomplete. I had read quite a few of Simenon's Maigret novels during my high school years, but what I read this time was not one of the familiar detective stories for which this author is best known but *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan*, a purely psychological novel, and a very good one, set in New York. Robbe-Grillet's *Ghost in the Mirror*s is not one of the *nouveaux romans* of which he is the most prominent progenitor in 20th century French literature but an autobiography, not surprisingly a very unconventional one which I thoroughly enjoyed and which sheds a great deal of light on his intensely psychological novels that break with the standard conventions of plot and character.

June 6

Strange dream last night with Scott at the centre. In the first part, Scott was driving a van with myself and his parents, but was stopped by the police and on the spot stripped of his driver's licence. Second, Scott was trying to intervene in the arrest and brutal treatment of his gay friend in homo-hostile Malaysia but was then arrested himself and treated with equal inhumanity. I tried to contact the Canadian government—the Department of Global Affairs?—to put a stop to this.

Two days ago, thanks to Turner Classic Movies I was able to watch the film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The classical Greek inspiration coming from Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy was easy to spot: General Mannon=Agamemnon, Christine=Clytemnestra, Vinnie (Lavinia)=Electra, Orin=Orestes, and Adam=Aegisthus. However, in my opinion the movie was pure family melodrama, gripping certainly but not in the least rising to the poetic grandeur of Aeschylus' masterpiece.

June 10

I have just finished reading P.D. James's *The Children of Men*, and in doing so I have pretty well completed the reading and study project, the 19th and 20th novel in western literature, which I started more than three years ago. I worked at it as systematically as I could, starting with the 19th and then continuing to the closing decades of the past century; the former took much more time. My main objective was to read novels not previously read by me and delve into authors I had not never touched before; however, there were quite a few novels, those read by me many decades ago and, almost invariably, on the reading list of English course I took during mu undergraduate years, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Dickens's *Bleak House* which benefitted from a fresh reading. The project introduced me to authors, English-, French-, and German language, I had never read before. As far as the non-English language works were concerned, I restricted myself to French and German, of which I had a good reading knowledge

and was therefore reasonably well equipped to judge the quality of the translations I used whenever I put them side by side with the original texts.

Since my Dutch is fluent, so I was happy to lay my hands on *De Avonden*, the first novel of Gerard van het Reve, which I had never read. Reve is rightly regarded as one of one of the premier writers of post-war Holland, but, although the novel is considered something of a classic in Netherlands literature (it was published in 1947), I begged to differ to differ strongly, and was not surprised to read the equally negative reviews by those who read it in the English translation, which only came out decades later. Since the second half of 19th century, Netherlandic, including Flemish, literature, has been distinguished by many superb novels, and, it has been a great privilege for me to have been able to read a good number of them.

I can draw only one grand conclusion from all my reading, and it is not a surprising one: despite the far-reaching experimentation with literary technique, above all with narratorial point of view, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and the ruptures of the *nouveau roman,* the novel remains firmly wedded to plot and character. I will certainly elaborate on this in future journal entries.

What next? I will continue to read novels, this time with far less systematic demarcation, and the 21st century will come into much greater view especially as far as the English-language novel is concerned. I almost completely by-passed the Russian novel in my project since my reading capacity of Russian is minimal, but now I want to go back to the great classics of Russian literature. The same applies to the Italian and Spanish novel; my moderate reading knowledge of these languages, although far fluent than of French and German, may at times, whenever possible, lead me back to the original texts.

June 14

A few weeks ago, thanks again to HBO I watched *The Goldfinch* and was much taken by it and now I have started on the book by Donna Tartt on which the movie was based. I have already read many enthusiastic accolades; the book won the Pulitzer Prize and has been hailed as "Dickensian" after the order of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. It will be interesting to see how far mine will go: So far (the first 121 pages), so good—very good indeed.

June 19

Finished reading *The Goldfinch* yesterday. It certainly deserves the high acclaims it received after its publication seven years ago. Along with Camus's 1948 *The Plague*, which I read recently for the first time, it has made a profound impression on me. I appreciate now why some critics called it "Dickensian": not only is it what would be called in German a *bildungsroman*, a coming of age novel, like the works by Dickens I mentioned five days ago, but, as in the quasi-autobiographical *David Copperfield*, its central character, Theo Decker, is also the narrator. However, the similarities should not be overstressed. Theo's very contemporary existential angst, which grows by the years and leads to his drug addiction, puts him at a far psychological and philosophical remove from the Victorian domestic certainties and pieties which come to sustain David Copperfield by the end of Dickens's novel. I cannot think of any character in Dickens

even remotely comparable to Theo's closest friend, the daemonic Boris, both devil—it is he who introduces Theo to hard drugs—and saviour to him. It is only in art—in Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean fashion, one might say—as supremely epitomized by Fabritius's unique miniature painting, that Theo ultimately finds a kind of consolatory meaningfulness in his own and in all human life: such are his reflections in his epilogue. (His direct, even intimate address there to the reader is a bit reminiscent of the typical Victorian novel; I am reminded especially of George Eliot.) The movie adaptation is very good but it does not, indeed it cannot attain to the psychological and philosophical depth of the book on which it is based.

June 22

Early yesterday afternoon, before heading into Halifax and Bedford, where he had a couple of shopping errands to do, Chris drove the two of us along the Eastern Shore where, for a while, we travelled along the open Atlantic, a vast expanse of grey water, from which a chilly freeze was blowing as the sun was completely fogged in. Many homes, we thought, were precariously built on the edge of the water—it must be scary for their residents when storms are piling up massive waves. Not surprisingly named and obviously a popular tourist spot, Fisherman's Cove was a big disappointment: its residential part was OK but the commercial centre was crowded with shabby-looking fisherman's shacks, many of which would have benefitted from a fresh coat of paint, quite a few of them advertising fresh lobster. I'll take nearby Hall's Harbour anytime. Later, in a waterside park on the north end of the Bedford Basin, we saw the Basin at its most scenic: the sun had come out by now, although it was still a fall-like chilly, and the Basin gleamed a glorious cobalt blue. We closed our afternoon of sightseeing with dinner at a Thai restaurant in Bedford and then drove back to the Valley, where temperatures had gone up to a summery 26.

June 25

It looks like my reading and study project focused on the 19th and 20th novel still has many gaps, for I was under the illusion that I was familiar with many outstanding American novels of which in fact I had seen only the film adaptations. Shame on me! I have started on *The Grapes of Wrath* and it has already become abundantly clear to me that the novel has a complexity and flexibility of narratorial voice and a depth of character portrayal which are absent from the 1940 movie, superb though that is; indeed, the medium of film as a whole, while it certainly has its own unique and priceless aesthetic, can never wholly stand in for the written word. The typical talkie movie has in fact no need of a narratorial voice, just the laying out of the story in image and sound —since the viewer will normally be able to weave in his or her own mind the movie's rendering of the story into a reasonably coherent narrative; if the movie does at times, as in *Citizen Kane*, introduce a distinctly narratorial voice—which may become that of a full-fledged commentator—it does so in order to clinch for the benefit of the viewer significant aspects (historical, moral, etc.)

June 27

Last night I watched at Glenn's *The Sleep Doctor*, the recently made sequel to the 1980 movie *The Shining* directed by Stanley Kubrick and based on a story by Stephen King. *The Shining* is a classic of the horror movie genre; thanks to its majestic cinematography, its darkly sonorous

musical score, and its inexorable and brilliantly paced unfolding of the story, it attains to an almost epic grandeur. I agree with Glenn that *The Sleep Doctor* is simply "creepy," although as such it is certainly entertaining.
There is a very disturbing episode, though, in which a young boy—perhaps around ten years old and already hailed by everyone a rising baseball star—is kidnapped, tortured and murdered by a small band of spectral psychotics of which the woman Rosie is the queen bee. All this is made pitilessly graphic. I don't believe that until fairly recently—perhaps not much more than a decade ago—such a horrific, revolting scene would have been admitted into a Hollywood scene. Critics have argued that such sadistic horrors have been become far too commonplace in recent film and television—catering, one is tempted to suppose, to an increasingly voyeuristic viewing public fascinated by such depravities. In this connection,, I remember well the movie *The Passion of the Christ* of some years ago which dwelt at inordinately gruesome lengths—certainly in my estimation and that of many others—on Jesus' physical suffering; however, some of the orthodox pious found it to be an salutary remember of the terrible price their Saviour was willing to pay in order to effect their salvation.

July 1

Canada Day. A cloudy, very muggy morning and things will get even more uncomfortable when the sun breaks through later this afternoon. I've already turned on all the fans just to get some movement in the air. CBC television's cheeriness earlier this morning bounced right off me, although, God knows, when we look at what is going on south of the border there is at least reason for a modicum of good feeling.

Fortunately—and this makes me feel, after all, quite buoyant today—the past six /seven months, including the past 3 ½ months of the pandemic, have been an exceptionally good time for me because of my first reading of four extraordinary novels: Vikram Seth's mammoth-length *A Suitable Boy* (1993) set in India of the early 50's, Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1948) set in French North Africa of the 40's, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* (2013) set in New York of the 90's and the 2000's, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) set in Oklahoma and California of the Great Depression. These novels deserve to be called classics of world literature, certainly for their meticulously, vividly portrayed settings of time and space but equally for the transcendent universality of meaningfulness they achieve in their story-telling.

July 2

Today it is still quite warm but without yesterday stifling mugginess and so it was good to see the sun out already early this morning.

I am continuing in my determination finally read novels of which I have only seen movies which are based on them. I read E.M. Forster's *Howards End* many decades ago since it was on the reading list of one of my university English courses, but my recollections of it were so hazy that my lack of knowledge of the novel was virtually equivalent to my never having read it. When the BBC made available its adaptation of what is widely considered Forster's masterpiece for a four-hour television series I eagerly bought the dvd and watched it in one night and was much taken by its superb production values and very fine acting, and then I read the novel in two days.

Howards End is regarded, along with *A Passage to India* as a classic of English literature. For myself, however, it is more of an Edwardian period piece vividly illustrating the lives of English women and men against the background of the prevailing attitudes to gender, sexual behaviour, imperialism, and, above all, social class in England of the first decade of the 20th century. The characters of Mr and Mrs Wilcox and, above all, Margaret Schlegel and her sister, the impulsive and rebellious Helen, are portrayed with admirable finesse, but for myself the person who really stands out is Leonard Bast, the lowly clerk who has some intellectual and artistic aspirations but is undone by the unforgiving rigours of social class and by his own insecurity and timidity while being trapped in an unfulfilling marriage; he is a character who could have walked straight out of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure.* He comes to a tragic end, but the story ends on a gleam of hope as the illegitimate child Helen has by him is adopted fully and happily into the Schlegel-Wilcox family constellation.

Within the last week I have also read—or rather skimmed through most of it— Jones's 1950 novel *From Here* to Eternity, set in Pearl Harbor on the eve and the immediate aftermath of the Japanese attack. The paperback version I have of the novel assures me that millions of copies have been sold, but I still find the much acclaimed 1953 movie—which I must have watched at least three times over the years— far more vivid and therefore more compelling in its story-telling and therefore have been able to put up (well, sort of) with its completely heterosexual ethos. I have been both surprised and disappointed by the intrusions, in the novel, of the subject of male homosexuality into the discussions and musings of some of the men; these exemplify pretty well the typical attitudes and prejudices of that era, although I was glad they stayed clear of the most strident homophobia. All in all, though, while I might watch the movie again, I don't think I will go back to the novel.

July 3

The documentary, "Welcome to Chechnya," I watched last night—as usual, thanks to HB0—was distressing and uplifting at the same time. It was about the vicious witch-hunt against gay men and lesbian women that started three years ago in this Caucasus-region, mostly Muslim republic of the Russian Federation, Cell phones had captured numerous testimonies and even life-recorded scenes of horrendous violence— brutal harassment, physical attacks, and even torture, often carried out by the law and order authorities themselves—against such persons. However, truly uplifting was the magnificent help offered by smart, resourceful, well-organized, and above all, brave gay men and lesbian women operating especially from their safe houses in Moscow and doing their utmost to take these unfortunates out of Chechnya to Moscow and, best of all, to get them accepted as legitimate refugees in a variety of western countries, among which Canada stood out as the most prominent (none accepted, not surprisingly, into Trump's America). The documentary's following of two young gay men very much in love with each other in their long odyssey towards full safety provided some of the most heart -warming moments. A brief interview with Dadyrik, the Putin-supported strongman of Chechnya who not only condoned but ratcheted up the witch-hunt reveals in one of the most repulsive individuals I have even watched. Putin and his regime who refused and still refuse to intervene come off as little better.

July 6

This past Saturday and Sunday the first big trip in months: Chris (as the driver of his car), Glenn and I off to Amherst, where we checked into our hotel and then drove to Joggins on Chignecto Bay with its designated UNESCO World Heritage site of a long stretch of cliffs abundant with 60 million old fossils. I had been there once before with Scott long ago before it got its present title; now there was a large pavilion with an impressive palaeontological museum and you could still walk the beach for miles looking for fossils. Then back to Amherst, where Chris and Glenn went for dinner and I went to visit Scott's gravesite and dropped in on Sheila and David. In the evening festive beer and wine in the bedroom shared by Glenn and myself and next morning back to the Valley but with a detour into the Halifax area, where we lingered for a while in the beautiful park on the north end of the Bedford Basin, the gathering place in WWII of the convoys which gathered there to cross the Atlantic. We must have travelled nearly 700 km these two days blessed as we were with ideal travel weather.

July 9

I have to add one more book, which I just finished reading, to the four I identified recently as being by far the greatest novels I had read over the past 6-7 months, namely Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* published in 1947, eight years before his death in 1955. I am much indebted to Chris who encouraged me to do so and lent me from his departmental library a copy of the superb English translation by H.T. Lowe-Peter; I hope to get hold of the German original in the near future. In its intellectual scope and depth it bears comparison with *The Magic Mountain*, but in its brilliant exploration of the *Zeitgeist* of German culture of the first three decades of the 20th century as this found its supreme expression in the tormented musical genius of Adrian Leverkűhn, it had an even greater impact on me than Mann's great novel of the 20's. I am a layman when it comes to musicology and so in my reading I came to stand in increasing awe of the virtuoso knowledge of the subject deployed in the novel. Christopher Marlowe and Goethe had already firmly established in world literature the person of Dr Faust and his bargain with the Devil but, by achieving a fine balance between the mythical and allegorical aspects, on the one hand, and, on the other, a realistic portrayal drawing on a specific era and culture, Mann has masterfully recreated him. Finally, is obvious to me that the narrator, Serenus Weitblom, Adrian's closest friend from childhood onwards, is, as he reveals himself from the beginning to the end, obviously the novel's the second major character, created, in every respect, both intellectually and psychologically to be Adrian's foil.

July 11

On the drive back from Halifax yesterday afternoon, Chris and I decided to get off the 101 and take a look at Smiley Provincial Park. I had never been there and Chris had not for many years. We got there after a 20 minutes drive mostly along winding secondary roads through pastoral and forested country. It is a beautiful spacious park with widely spread out facilities for picnicking and camping, but I was surprised how few people we encountered, remarking to Chris that in Holland or even in one of the more densely populated parts of Canada there would have been many hundreds or even thousands.

Saturday evening, thanks as usual to HBO, I watched the recently released movie of *Harrie*t, the story of Harriet Tubman, and what a magnificent story it is of a black woman's heroic fight of

seemingly insuperable odds against slavery in the American South. There has been a great deal of talk recently that if *Gone with the Wind* is to be shown again, it must be provided with words of introduction about the horrible erasure of fundamental human rights the institution slavery in the South represented; even better, I would suggest that *Harriet* be paired with part I of the 1939 blockbuster film, still regarded by not a few as the greatest American movie ever made.

June 15

A night of lively dreams, somewhat confused but certainly pleasant: travelling by bus to Boston to visit Bill Percy and vacationing with Scott all over the place in Europe.

I am continuing my reading of novels I never read before or read a long time ago, perhaps going back for decades, and then comparing film adaptations to them. I have just finished reading *All the King's Men* and then watching the two movies based on them which are in my collection. I agree with the estimation of critics of Robert Penn Warren's work as one of the truly great American novels of the 20th century and would easily place it myself in the league of *The Great Gatsby*, with the basic theme of which it has much in common. More superficially, it could be viewed as a vividly memorable illustration, in the life and career of Willie Stark, of Lord Acton's famous adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, mainly through the evolving reflections and ruminations of Jack Burden, Stark's chief aide who is the story's first-person narrator, on the meaning—if any—of his life and indeed of all human life, the novel achieves a profound existential dimension which goes beyond politics and ethics; these make Jack a central character in the novel, more centrally positioned than even Willie, as some critics have recognized. The sheer magnificence of Warren's prose which often becomes poetic in its focus and precision has also captivated me.

The 1949 movie version, which was notably honoured with Oscars, strikes me now as simply workmanlike, although Roderick Crawford as Willie Stark most certainly deserved his Oscar as best male actor. The 2006 adaptation did not achieve a similar acclaim, but I now regard it as superior, thanks in part to its splendid production qualities—much of the movie was shot in Louisiana—but above all through its capture of some of the novel's philosophical dimension in the character of Jack Burden, acted superbly by Jude Law. Sean Penn's portrayal of Willie Stark was criticized as being far too histrionic, but having watched the documentary on Huey Long—the historical person who was the inspiration behind Warren's novel—which came with the movie I watched last night, I'd say, yes, Penn exaggerates, but flamboyant outbursts were certainly not foreign to Long's consummate political oratory. Finally, in some of its scenes—I am thinking especially of the nocturnal scene where Anne Stanton walks into a sea glimmering with moonlight—the movie at times captures the poetic qualities of the novel.

July 17

Two nights of strange dreams The night before last: I was on campus—teaching part-time, I guess—and was doing my thing—perhaps washing my hands or brushing my teeth—in a kind of toilet cubicle with a small washstand of the kind you still find in older Dutch homes. Suddenly the door was opened—it wasn't locked—by a youngish, heavily overweight woman perhaps in her mid- or late twenties. There was a sign on the door saying "men," so I was quite startled.

She did not apologize and step back but I hastily left, but in doing so I brushed against her. She accosted me soon afterward with a member of the Student Council in tow, accusing me of improperly touching me. I speculate that this dream may have been generated in my unconscious because of my prejudice— very wrong of course—against obese persons about whom I grumble in my mind and sometimes even openly that these persons have no regard for their health or how they look.

Last night's dream was far more pleasant but also far more puzzling. I was travelling in Europe accompanied at times by Glenn. I ran into a guy in his 30's or early 40's who I was really attracted to and he turned out to be Flemish so that we started to speak Dutch and, even more important, he was the minister of foreign affairs of the European Union (a non-existent position, of course). He invited me to dinner with his family in the Dutch city of Nijmegen (the Union had offices all over Belgium and Holland) ; I enjoyed the dinner and meeting his family but I kept on wondering whether a young woman was his wife or some other relative. Glenn and I were invited to overnight in the Valkenburg, a large hunting lodge, in ruins now, which served Charlemagne more than 1200 years ago. Glenn and I made our way there and may have inspected the place, but my recollection is pretty well non-existent at this point. Other than my strong interest in the European Union, any opportunity to speak Dutch, and my sexual attraction to some men younger than myself, I see little or no point of contact in his dream with my waking hours. Does overnighting in Valkenburg adumbrate the idea of attempting a fruitless or even dangerous challenge?

July 20

I am continuing with my project of comparing novels I haven't read or at least not read recently with movies based on them in my collection. For fun's sake, I have started not with a novel but with an acclaimed drama—indeed one quite sensational for its time (1962)—by Albert Albee, *Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, most widely known for the stunning1965 movie version, in which Elizabeth Taylor won her well deserved Oscar for her emotionally shattering performance as Martha. The movie adaptation is, on the whole, very true to the play, but it loses some of its emotional impact by understating the dramatic role played by the young couple Nick and Honey, including Martha's mock-endeavour to seduce Nick and his bewildered response to it.
For fun's sake, I am now in the process in comparing the James Bond movie *From Russia With Love*— I have watched it more than once— to Ian Fleming's novel of the same name, which I am reading now for the first time, and here, too, I am already seeing the omission of what I consider to be significant content which could have been encapsulated in cinematically effective form—perhaps with only 10 minutes of playing time added. I like to imagine what a Stanley Kubrick might have done with the story.

Over the past few days I have also kept busy reading Heinrich Mann's—the brother of the more famous Thomas---*A Straw of Man* (German title, *Der Untertan*, "The Subject"), which Chris was kind enough to lend to me. Basing myself, I must add, on this one novel, I would rank Henrich's skills as a novelistic storyteller as not being of the same order as his brother's. However, in the course of my reading I did finally come to enjoy it as a sharp political and social-critical satire set around the turn of the century during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm: there are some vividly narrated scenes, especially the one at the very end where the massively attended ceremonious

unveiling of the grotesquely opulent monument to the Kaiser's great=grandfather is catastrophically terminated by a sudden and violent thunderstorm, and Diederich Hessling, the novel's central character and satirical focus, after finally having obtained the summit of local pre-eminence, is thrust into the nadir of a skin-drenched humiliation.

July 21

I have finished reading the novel and have watched the movie which I hadn't, I am sure, for many decades and must now very much qualify my earlier comments. *From Russia With Love* the novel bears all the hallmarks of the mid-50's when it was written at a time when the Cold War was still going strong and Russia was just beginning to emerge from its Stalinist quarter-century. By the years 1963-4, however, when the novel was being filmed the United States and the Soviet Union, thanks to the precipice of a nuclear holocaust they had found themselves standing upon in the fall of 1962, had reached a mutual state of semi-détente. Thus, in the movie, although Smersh is still hovering in the background, the real evildoer is Spectre, with which even the arch-villainess Rosa Klebbs has thrown in her lot. The movie keeps its wonderful locale in Istanbul, which seems less seedy and more modern now than in the novel, and many of the scenes there are picked up from the novel. However, the later scenes of James Bond and his new Russian mistress being pursued by a Spectre helicopter and, on the Adriatic Sea near Istria, by Spectre speedboats, typical Bond movie fare, are new additions. The novel has other features which must definitely date it: above all, there are the outright ethnic prejudices—shall I say racism?—uttered by a most definitely 'good guy,' Karim, the Anglo-Turkish operative of British Intelligence in Istanbul—to the effect that the Russians are basically masochists ruled by the knout and Stalin and that he Turks love their sultan of olden times together with war, pillage, and rape. A final note: in the movie the Orient Express is still drawn by steam locomotives: was that still the case at the time the movie was filmed?

July 24

It has occurred to me that I have read quite a few novels by Canadian authors which have received very fine film adaptations that are faithful to the novel, and I am fortunate to have been able to watch many of these movies, some of which are in my movie collection; these novels include Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, and Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy.* Unfortunately, I have not seen completely the film adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which came out soon after the novel's publication but with (I believe) with limited circulation while critical opinion was only lukewarm. However, the novel has been made into a television series, of which I have the first season, although I still have to get around to watching it. A television series that comes to many hours provides the opportunity for a detailed rendering of the story, but there is a danger of drawing it out excessively. It will be interesting to see if the sequel, *The Testaments*, will get the same treatment. Atwood's *Alias Grace*—in my opinion, one of her finest novels—was also recently made into a television mini-series (not as lengthy as that of *The Handmaid's Tale*), of which I watched only two episodes; if this becomes available in dvd format, I will be sure to buy it. I was able to do this for Lawrence Hill's superb *The Book of*

Negroes. The novel made a deep impression on me so that I lost no time buying the dvd with the television mini- series as soon as it became available.

July26

A day with Chris and Glenn off to Annapolis Royal, "The Cradle of Canada." A very warm day, but the breeze coming off the Annapolis Basin was refreshing. It was good to see—I hadn't been there-for some years and this time the sightseeing lingered longer—that the explanatory plaques also underlined the contributions made to life in the French and then the British settlements by the Mi'kmaw people, a far cry from the 1904 monument to the Sieur de Mons which spoke of him as the "pioneer of "civilization" in that locale. It is a pity, though, that most of the original buildings are no longer there, just the British-built officers house. Also, the fact that some of the cannons –the really big ones—were of WWI vintage adds a discordant note. Next off to nearby Clementsport with its late 18th-century, Loyalist built Anglican church and its old cemetery where a lot of gravestones bore Dutch names. We also did some antiques browsing in two stores, the first of which was housed in a beautifully refurbished church presided over by its most congenial and knowledgeable owner. I picked up two books for ten dollars, an incredible buy which would have cost me many times more at the second-hand bookstore I frequent in Wolfville. Finally, dinner at a German restaurant in A.R. and then the drive back to Wolfville and New Minas.

July 28

Unbelievable but I learned of it last night from the local (Halifax) CBC news and a bit earlier from a Halifax-based online newsletter (the latter also did some very good investigative journalism on the root cause behind it all): rents are going up wildly in Halifax, up to 70% in some cases; one woman, who has a very small income—probably, I suspect, from a disability allowance—has seen the rent of her shabby basement apartment going from $725 to $1225, and is now looking desperately for a new place which she can afford—for this, this she may have to move to the outskirts of the HRM. According to the *Halifax Examiner* large rental properties are increasingly being taking over by large out-of-province (e.g. in Toronto), real estate companies who obviously want Halifax to go the way of cities like Vancouver and Toronto in this respect. Explanations that such increases are justified by increased taxes and insurance and maintenance costs don't wash. Where are government-imposed rent controls, where is adequate public housing? Where is wide public outrage?

August 1

Some time ago I noted my being prone to mood swings, or to use the learned word, cyclothymia. The problem has been with me for years, probably even decades, but it was somewhat exacerbated by the pandemic crisis. Already a few months ago, fortunately, I was to able to say I was handling this challenge as constructively as I could, and I have happy to be able to say now I have made some more progress, although I doubt I will ever be rid completely of this mild manic-depressive seesawing. It is my good fortune to be blessed with good health, stable finances, and wonderful family and friends. I am especially grateful for my deepening friendship with Chris over the past few months; I see the two of us being so mutually supportive that at

times it seems truly miraculous. Devoting much of my spare time, of which I have lots, to a project of systematic reading which I already started years earlier has been very good for me since I like to think it has been what I would call creative reading as opposed to simply keeping myself occupied. Finally, prayer and meditation—the latter often carried out in my own idiosyncratic fashion of drawing on my knowledge of Greek and Latin—have also played a crucial role, probably *the* crucial role, in mitigating my problem.

August 3

Driving back home after spending a few hours in Halifax yesterday, we turned off the 101 near Hantsport in order to have a look at Glooscap Nation, a small first First Nation community of which there are quite a few in Nova Scotia. Both the modest but wellkept houses with their inviting gardens as well as the public buildings in good shape were a pleasant surprise to me. This was a community that breathed dignity and self-respect: it showed our fellow Canadians of the First Nations are fully capable, if given the opportunities and resources they so much deserve, of living lives which, as one of their chiefs put it so well, are certainly modern but the same time lived according to their traditional values.

Over the past ten days, I read three American novels, namely *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *In The Heat of the Night* from the 60's, and the other, *Gone With the Wind*, from the 30's, which touch profoundly upon issues of race, Black and White that is. All three were made into movies. Movies adapted from novels or plays necessarily have to be very selective. Harper Lee's novel, which soon became a literary classic, spends about half its length situating Atticus and his two children Jem and Scout—who is the narrator—in the ambiance of their neighbourhood and of their 1930's small town in Alabama, and in their interactions with family, friends, and acquaintances; the movie, by contrast, launches the reader much sooner into the climactic trial of the black young man falsely accused of raping a white woman. The movie version—which, too, I have watched more than once—of John Ball's novel, a murder mystery and detective story set in a 1960's southern town which still has not felt the full impact of the civil rights movement, is similarly selective, condensing and simplifying the story-line, but, like the other movie, is eminently successful in capturing social milieu and individual character.

Margaret Mitchell's lushly and vividly written *Gone of the Wind* was a spectacular bestseller right from its publication in 1936, winning the highest possible praise from the critics and the Pulitzer Prize in 1937. The movie which came out in 1939 was an equally momentous success. Its first part, which covers the actual Civil War part of the story, is certainly one of epic grandeur, though the second part, in my estimation, has more of the lesser qualities of mere melodrama. In both parts, the movie, which I too have watched more than once, is inevitably selective, and this probably is a good thing, for among the ruminations of the novel's narrator about the period of Reconstruction in the postwar South there is an egregiously racist tirade directed against the now 'emancipated' blacks. Fortunately, this did not find its way into the movie which itself has recently come into renewed criticism for its racist presuppositions and undertones. One can only imagine the shock and anger any black man or woman would have felt in encountering this unvarnished, worst possible Jim Crow stuff in the novel.

August 5

A dream with Scott last night and while not particularly pleasant, it was not unhappy either. Scott comes home after a long period of travel and wandering. He is difficult, as he so often is, but I am happy to see him.

August 9

Have seen two great movies over the past two days, the recently released *Midway* and Charley Chaplin's classic 1936 *Modern Times*. I recently read a review of the former; it was negative, but I give the movie high marks for its splendid acting and its superb production values, although I thought the computer graphics were at times overdone. *Modern Times* has the unique Chaplin mix of slapstick, satire, and sentimentality. The satire is certainly timeless, having an unambiguous message even for our times.

I have just finished reading Mary Trump's *Not Enough and Too Much*, her take on her uncle Donald Trump. It is revealing of the family dynamics that propelled Trump to his flamboyant career as a real estate developer and then to the presidency. However, even though Ms Trump is a PhD psychologist and her analysis and assessment of Trump's relationship with his father, who alone made his meteoric rise to fame and fortune possible, is convincing, on the whole there is too much of what I'd call typically American pop psychology in her book. Yes, the Trump family was a toxic brew but so were and still are much of American society and politics and the ultimate values by which they are driven; they more than anything else explain the phenomenon that is Donald Trump.

August 10

More than a week ago, I began to think that my reading project on the 19th and 20th novel had petered out. I still saw the need for the occasional excursion, for instance, into the detective and crime novels of the first part of the 20th century, especially in American literature, with names like Dashael Hemmett, Mickey Spillane, and Raymond Chandler coming to mind, but it was high time for me now to return to the Greek and Roman classics. I'd start with drama and epic, focusing on works I had never read or done so only cursorily—to a large extent because I had never included them in the reading lists for my literature courses. I began with Sophocles, and now I am starting on Euripides. The modus operandi of my reading is that I use at least two good modern and widely used translations, frequently comparing their renderings to the original Greek, and thereby determining which of the translations is the superior one. This worked out very well for the three tragedies I read of Sophocles, namely *Electra*, *The Women of Trachis*, and *Philoctetes*. I used the translations in the British Penguin Classics and the American Complete Greek Tragedies series; this allowed to do my reading much faster and more pleasurably than slogging through the often difficult Greek text alone would have been.

Very soon I started to prefer the American translations for, on the whole, they are much closer to the Greek text without in the least sacrificing literary quality and, to be frank, readability. Reading these three dramas in this way confirmed to me Sophocles' supreme mastery of tragic drama; here he certainly stands alongside Shakespeare. I am thinking here of true drama with

tensely focused interaction between grandly dimensioned characters, not simply magnificent poetry, of which Aeschylus and Euripides, too, have their ample share.

August 12

I can't help thinking of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was one of the first works of his I read when I was still an undergraduate student. Over the last two nights I've had three strange dreams the meaning of which and the origins of which in my memory banks and my subconscious (or unconscious?) I'm still trying to piece together. Dream no. 1: A 15-year old boy propositions me but I decline. Probably based on a real-life experience of mine many years ago when I was living with Scott in our bungalow on Sherwood Drive in Wolfville; Scott was propositioned by the same guy, and did the same as I; Glenn had a recent such experience in Halifax. The dream may also spring from the fact that the William A. Percy Foundation where I serve on the board of directors concerns itself, among others, with U.S. law and patently consensual male same-sex relationships where the younger partner is still a minor under the law. Dream no. 2: I'm still living at home with my parents even though I'm adult; I pay them no room and board, and my mom is very upset about this; in fact, I have a good income, being retired and drawing a comfortable income from my pension. I still have to figure this one out. It may spring from the fact that in the summer after my first undergraduate year, where I had enjoyed very generous scholarships and bursaries and was flush with cash—I also had a summer job then—my parents bought their first house in Canada; at that time they were still somewhat strapped and needed money for the down payment—by the following year tbey were doing splendidly since the bookbinding shop my dad had started was doing extremely well—and so they asked me to make a contribution; I did so but was rather annoyed but because the request had been very insistent. Dream no. 3: I find myself suddenly and inexplicably stranded in the state of Indiana, an ultra-conservative state, and it showed. I still have to figure it out completely: it is obviously connected with the current presidential campaign in the U.S; I am currently reading Euripides and my abruptly being swooped to Indiana has something Euripidean about it.

August 14

Thanks to HBO I was able to watch las night a most telling and timely documentary, entitled "Yusuf Hawkins: Storm in Brooklyn," since I suspect it was put together as a response to the brutal police killing of George Floyd last May. It tells the story of the fatal shooting of a black teenager who was fatally shot in an Italian-American neighbourhood in Brooklyn in August 1989. He and two friends had gone into the neighbourhood with totally innocuous intent, namely to look into a used car advertised for sale. The three were set upon by a large troop of young men from that neighbourhood who clearly meant violence and Yusuf was killed by a gunshot. This crime went eventually to the courts and the finally identified killer was found guilty of second-degree murder and sentenced to a long prison sentence. The black community rightly interpreted the attack as an eruption of a virulent racism endemic—even though it may have been rather quiescent for much of the time— in that white community, and organized large marches of protest making their way through that community which elicited much and a very vocal hostility from the latter. This situation dragged on for months, even years. Yuzuf is commemorated now by a large mural in his neighbourhood. To the best of my recollection, this

story never made much news in the Canadian media at the time, but I am glad it finally came to my attention: the parallels, and the lessons to be learned from them, with what happened in Minneapolis almost three months ago and its enormous aftermath are striking. Interesting to see a much younger Rev. Al Sharpton, for whom I have a tremendous respect, as an already prominent activist at that time.

August 16

A great event for me, who consider myself a bit of a techno-phobe, that is, my participating, from a Zoom platform—a first for me—in the annual meeting yesterday of the executive and board of directors of the William A. Percy Foundation, where I serve on the board. A lengthy meeting, too, with the first part dealing with old business lasting two hours, and the second—after a lengthy break—taken up mainly by new business stretching into more than three. It was the perfect digital medium for holding a meeting for which face to face was impossible under the circumstances. I did not say very much but I felt fully involved in the back-and-forth discussion among the eight participants in a meeting which was expertly chaired by Tom Hubbard.

August 21

This must have been a first for me: watching the Democratic Party's Convention—spread over no less than four evenings—right from the beginning to the very end. In the past, I have watched political conventions far more selectively, only in snippets really. But now there is so much at stake for the U.S. and indeed for the whole world. Despite a few minor irritations—especially continually announcing upcoming events as coming up "ahead" or "soon" instead of indicating specific times—the whole Convention was truly inspirational and, at the very end. Joe Biden spoke magnificently, just what Americans and the peoples of the whole world so desperately needed to hear. Next week, the Republican Convention: it will be for me and most others a study in stark, so sad contrasts.

August 22

What a pleasure it was last night to celebrate—drinking the toast with a superb local champagne no less— with Vernon and Tammy, and joined by a few close friends, on the publication of his new book. I am impressed with the well-deserved credit Vernon gives to Tammy to the extent of listing her name on the title page and having a foreword by written by her. For this reason, it was very good and appropriate to have my copy inscribed by both of them. I have already given the book quick perusal, as is my usual practice, before proceeding to a more detailed and intensive reading, and am already amazed by its wide-ranging, superbly integrated scholarship and the originality of its insights which even at this early stage have been popping out at me.

August 26

I have almost finished reading classical Greek tragedy—at least those dramas (and they were many) I had never read or read only cursorily. I used translations for all of them, translations which I had been using for many years, especially in the Classics in Translation courses I had taught for decades—but always with an eye on the Greek original. I am fortunate to have all the

Greek texts (some having commentaries, both English- and Dutch-language, as well) in my library. Nearly all of these I acquired in my undergraduate and graduate student years, the exception being a collection of all of Euripides's dramas which was published in Germany in 1827(!); the paper is a bit musty but otherwise in excellent condition. In going through some of these texts I came across the numerous annotations—mainly pertaining to vocabulary—which I must have made as a student and so go back for more than half a century. It was like coming across time-capsules, distant in time but made vivid again, from my own life.

August 29

I finished my reading two days ago. Going through most of Euripides' 20 dramas was for me the greatest pleasure of all, and as a result I have a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the emotional and intellectual range of his theatre. It is even clearer to me now that Euripides composed his plays with two very different strata of spectators and audiences in mind, one—the large majority most probably—that wanted only sheer melodrama and exciting story-lines with surprising twists and turns, and the other that appreciated complexity and irony and fully recognized the fundamental ethical and moral issues the playwright brought forward, above all the ubiquitous oppression of women and the utter futility of war. All of his dramas have been translated by Philip Vellacott with great forcefulness and beauty in the Penguin Classics series, and so in the course of my reading, I developed for a while a strong preference for his renderings. However, as I was also keeping an eye on the Greek text, I became somewhat uncomfortable with the extent of this translator's departure from the literal Greek. I totally endorse the practice of what has been dynamic translation which does not hesitate to abandon literal or close translation in favour of one that brings out the full semantic richness of the source text, but I began to sense that too many times the departure by Vellacott was—in my judgment, at least—was too radical, and so for the last four dramas on my reading list I turned mainly to the American-authored The Collected Greek Tragedies series.

August 30

I did a quick go-over of all my entries since I started my journal last January and am embarrassed now about the anger I expressed in February over the blockade of our country's railway lines by protesting indigenous groups and the initial very weak response to it by the national government. My anger towards the government remains valid but my overall conclusion that (police, military?) force must be used in all the strength necessary to break the impasse was not justified. I have empathize much more now with the reasons behind the protests of many of Canada's First Nations. Forward to the following month as the Covid-19 pandemic began to strike with full force. I then questioned the necessity for a lockdown, but events since then have proved it was necessary—all the more, since it is now clear that persons infected with the virus may remain asymptomatic. The fact that, proportionally, the death toll in Canada is now much lower than in the US and a large number of European and Latin-American countries speaks for itself.

September 1

Just finished a long telephone chat with Vernon, who called me for some more detailed response on my part to the most important ideas emerging from his recently published book. It was good

to see that our thinking on these is very much alike: above all, the world as experienced by Lucius, the narrator and central character of *The Golden Ass*, for all its superficially comical aspects, is a very dark place indeed, from which Lucius near the end cries out for redemption and which he is finally granted through the miraculous intervention of the universal goddess Isis; this makes for an ultimately religious-philosophical reading. A glimmer of this positive and redemptive quality comes through in William Faulkner's final and semi-autobiographical coming-of-age comic novel, *The Reivers*, which, as Vernon convincingly demonstrates, was clearly inspired by Apuleius' work. With the incisive analyses and illuminating insights emerging within his total interpretative framework Vernon proves he is now as much a Faulkner as an Apuleius scholar.

Appropriately enough, when Vernon called I was pretty well at the end of watching the virtual gathering of Global Scholars Canada.

September 2

A pleasant dream involving Scott last night, worth recording. I met him on his way to a university or college library where he intended to bone up on Roman history. I accompanied him to the same, where I did some research on the dates of some short-lived Roman emperors. There was a Classics conference going on around us.

September 3

Just over a week ago I finished my reading by classical Greek tragedy by turning to Aeschylus, chronologically the first of the great trio of tragedians. I had read and taught the three plays of the Oresteia trilogy so often that I did not go back to them. His *Prometheus Bound* and *The Persians* had also been frequently on my reading list but I thought they deserved a fresh reading. Then I turned to *The Suppliant Women* and *The Seven* Against Thebes, which I had never attracted me because of their archaically static presentation of the story and therefore never read. The latter, however, with its ringing martial tone and its elaborate, even at times bombastic descriptions of the "Seven" and the seven champion warriors of Thebes as they prepare for and engage in single combat still resonates in my mind. Also stirring is the scene with Antigone at the end which anticipates Sophocles' *Antigone*.

September 7

A few days ago I finished Raymond Chandler's *The High Window* and Dashiell Hammett's *The Big Knockover* (a collection of short stories). I have always enjoyed crime and detective fiction; way back in high school in Wallaceburg I read a lot of Agatha Christie's stuff and later became a big fan of the movies based on her novels. In English literature she exemplifies the genteel tradition, like her great predecessor Arthur Conan Doyle and the much more recent P.D. James; France, of course, has the inimitable Georges Simenon and his signature inspector Jules Maigret. I had already read the American Raymond Chandler before. He, too, represents the genteel tradition as perfectly embodied in private detective Philip Marlowe, the narrator in all his novels. In fact, it would not be amiss to wonder if Marlowe might not be a (closeted, of course) gay man if you go by the fact he is unmarried and has a constantly demonstrated predilection for giving

detailed descriptions of his diverse characters' clothes and physical features as well as of the furnishings of their homes. Dashiell Hammett, on the other hand, exemplifies in his fiction the tradition of the tough-guy, 'hard-boiled' detective, which I do not particularly care for (although like many others I love the classic movie adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* with Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade), so I doubt if I'll read beyond *The Big Knockover*. The latter, however, does have three short stories I really liked; two set in 1920's San Francisco and having complicated story-lines that leave you guessing until the very end, one of them drawing you into the city's exotic Chinatown, and the third setting its story in a truly Wild West kind of Arizona in the 1920's.

September 8

Last week I bought a second-hand DVD with D.W. Griffith's 1916 *Intolerance*, and then over the past two evenings I watched in two sittings—it is a 2.43 hrs movie. Even though the picture quality wasn't the greatest—the film tape had obviously not been digitalized—in my response it lived up to the acclaim it received when it was issued more than a century ago. This is indeed an epic movie of grandeur and marked a towering achievement in cinematography. For me, the non-linear segmentation and sequencing of the four stories, with the contemporary story of The Beloved and The Boy intertwined with these and finally leading everything to its majestic denouement heightened the dramatic impact of the movie as a whole. I saw the movie for the first time decades ago when it was shown for the benefit of the Classics Society at Acadia, but then I was mainly focused on the historically based stories and paid no attention to the crucially significant contemporary story, so this was truly like watching this grand movie for the first time.

September 11

A male same-sex relationship in an American film noir of the 1940's—amazing!—although "quasi" should be put before "relationship." The movie is *Born to Kill* (part of which I had seen before but thanks to TCM I was able yesterday to watch it from the beginning to the end). Sam and Marty are the couple; they are also roommates and even share a bed; they are shown lying together on it, albeit fully dressed—unthinkable, of course, in any other serious American movie of this homophobic era. But the relationship is a troubled one, to put it very mildly. Sam, handsome and physically imposing, is a homicidal psychotic—and basically heterosexual to boot. Marty is a puny guy who adores Sam, trying incessantly to be a moderating influence on his mate, who only finds him useful as a gopher and a minor hitman for himself; there is no affection whatsoever on Sam's part. Marty is eventually killed by Sam, who needs to extricate himself from an embarrassing situation in which he might be charged with being an accessory to murder. At the end Sam himself is shot dead by the police. A final comment on this 1947 movie as a whole: one of the very best of the genre, very stylishly made and with impressive acting by a fascinating gallery of characters, male and female.

September 13:

What a marvellously colourful and uplifting dream last night! Scott very prominent in a group of young men unmasking the evil of the tyrannical occupation by China of a (Canadian?) great city. Eventually they are flying fighter jets in order to obliterate the occupiers.

I have finished reading Stefan Zweig's memoir, *The World of Yesterday*, and have started on Victor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*. I can already see the sharp contrasts between these men as they represent themselves but I must hold off until I have finished reading the latter.

September 14

Just Mercy: last night watched an emotional rollercoaster of a movie if I ever saw one: an innocent black man convicted of murder in a still unapologetically racist Alabama of the late 1980's and early 1990's and ending up on death row for six years, and finally released thanks to the fierce loyalty of his family and the brilliant, unremitting hard work of his lawyer—a black man, too, and a recent graduate of Harvard——on his first case and backed up, fortunately, by what has turned out as an increasingly successful national organization. A movie of timely relevance.16-17

September 16-17

I finished the first volume of Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness* covering the years 1933-1941 yesterday. Chris lent me the copy in the library of the German programme; I will have to go to the University Library, next week probably, to take out the second volume covering the years 1942-1945. However, I found the writing of the first volume so vivid and revealing that I will venture already now on a comparison between Klemperer's diary and Zweig's memoir.

Zweig became one of the world's best known authors in the world in the 1920's and 1930's; amazingly, his works were translated into more than 30 languages, including Russian, Chinese, and Japanese. The diversity of his literary output was almost equally amazing: poetry, drama, novels, essays, and what he is still best remembered for, biographies, characterized by a sharp psychological focus, of literary giants such as Tolstoy, Dickens, and Balzac (before he died he had been working on even larger study of the last) and also of historically controversial figures such as Mary Stuart of Scotland and Marie Antoinette. I have dipped into a few of these. His memoir amply demonstrates his vivid and elegant writing style. The first eight chapters take the reader as far as the beginning of the First World War, across the years and decades when Zweig, thanks to both his remarkable talents and his Jewish upper middle class background, came to experience himself fully immersed in the riches of European high culture in a period of unprecedented peace; still a relatively young man, he could already pride himself on his friendships with Europe's established and newly emerging literary greats such as Verhaeren, Rilke, and Valéry. The chapter with his nostalgic memories of glorious Paris as it was in the early 20th century stands out especially. (As I read it, though, I couldn't help but be reminded, by way of sharp contrast, of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*: Orwell, although he writes about a Paris a bit later in time than Zweig in this chapter, reveals the dark underside of this great city.)

The horror and of WWI shattered the relative political and social stability of Europe which had lasted for decades, and right after the war Zweig found himself a citizen not of the Austro-Hungarian Empire but of the rump state of Austria. There followed a few difficult years of adjustment to the new realities for Zweig and his family, but already Zweig began to move into a long period of literary productivity which led to his becoming a truly world-famous author. These years of continual travel and sojourning around the world mark Zweig as the supreme cosmopolitan, the world citizen par excellence, and they continue when he abandons his permanent residency in Austria for good in early 1934. By the summer of 1940 as Hitler's armies occupy most of western and northern Europe and the triumph of Nazi Germany seems almost complete, Zweig, who had foreseen the looming catastrophe for years, now finds himself a stateless Jewish refugee. Thanks to his fame as an author, he might have found refuge in a U.S. still not at war and a position at a fine American university, much as Thomas Mann had done already much earlier. But he never pressed for such an opportunity. Instead, he and his wife eventually settled in a welcoming Brazil, in the city of Petropolis, where for while he seemed happy, having, among others, access to an excellent library. Even so, in February 1942, Zweig was by now so completely demoralized and depressed as he had to come to the conclusion that the door to a renewed literary creativity was firmly closed for him, that he, together with his wife, committed suicide. As he wrote in a postscript to his memoirs—which were published in 1943—"…unusual powers are needed to make another wholly new beginning. Those powers I now possess have been exhausted by long years homeless wanderings."

Like Stefan Zweig. Victor Klemperer came from a liberal middle class Jewish family; in fact, the synagogues they attended had abandoned all the trappings of traditional Judaism, and some, like Klemperer himself, had converted to Protestant Christianity, a fact which in Nazi eyes, however, did not excise their Jewishness. Klemperer eventually settled for an academic career specializing in French literature and taught for many years at a technical university in Dresden. His great love was the French Enlightenment of the 18th century and this was also the principal subject of his research and writing. Since his wife Eva was non-Jewish the two were spared almost right until the end the worst horrors of Nazi persecution. Victor was not forced out of his teaching position until 1935 and then received a pension—eventually much reduced—which for a long time permitted them to have a modest life-style. The financial support, from his brother Georg, a successful surgeon, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1935, also helped a great deal. In fact, in 1934 they were able to have built for themselves a small house in a rural village on the outskirts of Dresden, and the following year Klemperer bought a used car which he was able to keep until 1938. In 1940, however, they were forced to sell their house without any financial gain for themselves, and had to move to Dresden into a large house divided into increasingly precarious , especially as far as food was concerned but they held out until February 13th 1945 when Victor and many others were ordered to report for immediate transportation to Poland, where, as they rightly guessed, a certain death was awaiting them. Fortunately this was also the date of the terrible firestorm bombing of Dresden, and in the confusion he and Eva were able to escape. After much wandering they found final safety in the American-occupied Zone of Germany. They were able to rebuild their lives in East Germany, the German Democratic Republic, where Victor returned to academe, teaching, writing, and attending conferences until his death in 1960 at the age of 78.

What I have read is a diary and not a memoir such as Zweig's *The Word of Yesterday*, and therefore has a continuous day-to-day detail and immediacy which a memoir does not possess. In fact, Klempcrer records his and his wife's life under Nazi persecution with an utter 'warts and all' frankness in which they do not spare themselves. At times this comes close to reaching seriocomic proportions: thus we witness Eva's numerous episodes of poor health—including her ever-troubling dental problems—and nervous breakdowns, all of these perhaps pointing to hypochondria;I can't help but think of Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire*. (In seeing Eva's possible hypochondria from what I call a seriocomic perspective I recognize I may seem unfeeling; whatever it might have been it certainly added a lot of stress to Victor's and Eva's lives. I would also emphasize that I greatly admire Eva's love of gardening which she was to put into full practice for several years in their new home.) I must also add Victor's constant worrying about his heart; Victor's and Eva's anxious concern for being able to give their beloved house pet, the tomcat Nickelchen,the proper food—expensive meat!—he requires; their moving and settling, attended with much mess and confusion, into their new home; and, last but not least, the Chaplinesque tribulations and agitations suffered by Victor as he learns how to drive.

The diary reveals that the couple did experience at times a surprising kindness and helpfulness, even after the start of WWII, from those with whom they came into contact, a fact underlined by the translator in his Introduction and suggesting that the Jew-hatred indoctrinated by the Nazis did not have its desired impact on the entire population. I myself, too, believe that the average German civilian had no suspicion of the ultimate evil of the Holocaust.

Despite the increasing hardships he was working under, Klemperer did not abandon his big research and writing project on 18th French literature, even though he despaired at times whether it would ever see publication. He also worked on an autobiography and on a study of Nazi language and terminology, which he called the *Lingua Tertii Imperii*. I am amazed at his remarkable determination and tenacity.

His truly shining moment in the first volume of the diary covering the years 1933-41 comes during his eight-day imprisonment in July 1941 on a charge of failing to black-out a window in his and Eva's apartment. He records these days and nights in 27 pages of minutely detailed narrative and description enlivened, among others, by his making up of word puzzles and by some clever satirical observations such as on the commonalities of hyperbolism shared by Nazi propaganda and American advertising. Most of all I admire his lengthy reflections on the meaning of life, in which he is sustained by his humanism and his love for the giants of the French Enlightenment, whom he never failed to defend against the charge of superficiality—in contrast with the supposed profundity of German thought— levelled at them by Francophobic German critics. His agnosticism is not dogmatic: he cites the fundamental existential principles of enquiry of his beloved Michel Montaigne, the prince of 16th century French humanism: Que sais-je? and Tout est possible, même Dieu.

As a scholar Victor Klemperer never even came remotely close to the international stature of Stefan Zweig as an author. But he is a most noble survivor, a giant in his determination, tenacity, courage, and humanity. And here I place Eva Klemperer right beside him. I look forward to reading the second volume of Victor's diary.

September 20

I was very pleased to learn from Bill Percy in our telephone conversation yesterday that the highly respected British classicist Mary Beard had placed in a recent book of hers the modal age of first marriage for Roman men in the early 20's. This accords with the conclusion I reached when I went back some years ago to the conclusions Bill, Arnold Lelis (a former graduate student of his), and I myself reached in our 2003 book on Roman marriage, in which we sharply disagreed with the currently prevailing orthodoxy and placed the modal age of first for marriage for women—girls really—at 15 (not the late teens) and for men in the late teens (not late 20's). I corrected the latter thanks to a different assumption which had the advantage of exactly paralleling the assumption we had used to establish the modal age of marriage for females and now placed the modal age for men in the early 20's. Unfortunately, we had failed to convince nearly everyone with our conclusions in our book, but I was gratified by the support we received then from a classicist at the University of Leiden. He brought forward that his research on Christian society in Late Antiquity pointed to a modal age of 23 for men in that era: this is very close to the correction I made in my postscript. I sent my revised view to one of the leading scholars in Roman social history who subscribes to the orthodox view, but he was not convinced. Bill encouraged me to circulate my correction via a published paper. However, I would probably be expected then to compose a fairly standard-length article freighted with all the relevant bibliographical information, but I made a firm decision a few years ago not to go for that kind of scholarly writing anymore. In any case, I am confident that my view on this matter will eventually prevail and I am pleased that Professor Beard is on board with me in this regard.

September 21

Of the several movies I've watched over the past few days one is very bad, the other extremely good. In fact, I'd call the former, *Quantum Blood* (which I watched on HBO), execrably bad. A zombie virus—when this craze for zombie movies end?—which turns humans into ravenously biting maniacs and has already widely infected white communities, now also strikes a Mi'qmaw one. Yes, the movie staggers to a spuriously happy ending for three folks, including a newborn baby, but I am amazed that this bad, blood spattered low-budget Canadian movie would get government financial support in the form, I imagine, of ample tax credits; the Quebec government is named among the credits and the movie seems indeed to have been shot in that province, possibly also in New Brunswick since I thought I recognized the large bridge spanning the wide Miramichi River—but I may be wrong. But what are the Mi'qmaq doing in Quebec? I was really sorry to see First Nations actors lend their undoubted talents to such a bad movie.

The other movie, *Outbreak,* issued in 1995, reminded me very much of the 2013 film *Contagion*. A 100% fatal virus, stemming from a monkey in the Congo, makes its way to the U.S,, creating of course massive havoc. This is a real nail-biter of a movie. I would give it at least 3 1 ½ stars as opposed to the 2 ½ at which Leonard Maltin rates it in his 2013 movie guide. Yes, the super-heroism and super-resourcefulness of the character played by Dustin Hoffman, the army doctor, is unbelievably stretched, and the icy, pitiless callousness of the general played by Donald Sutherland might also be considered played over the top, but does not history tells us that such individuals do exist?

September 24

After my reading of Greek tragedy a few weeks ago, I have now turned to Roman literature, and this morning I just finished reading of the comedies, all six of them, of Terence. Amazing that he wrote them while he was probably still in his early and middle 20's (he died young), a good-looking and intelligent young man, a former slave who was very fortunate to have some of the leading Roman aristocrats, all Hellenophiles, as his patrons. He drew on Greek New Comedy as the model for his plays, but they have the unmistakeable touch of his own unique talent for composing intricate plots driven by characters who, while they draw on the stock-characters of earlier comedy, both Greek and Roman, are invested by him with complexity and humanity. It is no wonder that later generations of educated Romans esteemed his comedies, above all the unaffected elegance of their Latinity, and playwrights and other authors in the later West such as Erasmus and Molière were greatly inspired by them.

I have read them in the excellent translations in the Penguin Classics series, with an eye on the original Latin. I enjoyed all of them although I was slightly disappointed by two. One line spoken in *The Self-Tormenter*, "I am a human being and nothing human is alien to me," is deservedly one of the most quoted lines in Roman literature, but of all the plays this is the thinnest on plot. *Phormio*—which is the only comedy of Terence I had read previously, decades ago when it was on the reading list of a senior Latin course I taught—has a most intricate and ingenious, plot but the character who drives it to its happy ending, that master intriguer and improvisor *Phormio,* does not, in my opinion, appear often enough on the stage, and the moment-to-moment heavy lifting, so to speak, for the development of the plot is done by the dutiful, almost ever-present Geta.

In Terence's comedies there are a striking number of 'asides' spoken by the characters, that is, utterances which are not directed to another character present on the stage and are not meant to be overheard by anyone. They are not monologues, which are spoken by a speaker alone on the stage. The author seems to be fond of these. While I have not done anything like exact counts, there seems to be a greater frequency of them in Terence than in his great predecessor, Plautus; in the Greek New Comedy of Menander they are very uncommon and in the Old Comedy of Aristophanes virtually non-existent. His resort to them violates of course our expectations of the proper techniques to be used towards the realistic representation of character, but Terence obviously found it useful to go beyond dialogue and monologue in this way in order to round out his portrayals. Modern adaptation for performance of his comedies would have to deal with these 'asides' drastically, either somehow mesh them with true dialogue, convert lengthy asides into monologues, or omit them all together, The positioning of the actors on the stage, including their entrances and exits, would also require drastic adaptation to make Terence's plays work on the modern stage.

September 26

Next on my reading agenda focused on Greek and Roman literature is post-Augustan Roman epic, which was completely absent from the reading lists of any of my undergraduate and graduate Latin courses. I have already pulled the works of Lucan, Valerius Flaccus, Statius, and Silius Italicus from my library—thank God, I have a very good Classics library and am not

dependent on the now largely dysfunctional—in my opinion certainly—Acadia Library But there will be other books to read as well, mostly novels again which, in my opinion, stand out in 9th or 20th century literature. For the third time in 4 months I made a special trip to the Odd Book shop in Wolfville for this purpose; and then of course there always movies to watch I haven't seen before.

September 28

When I visited Peter last Friday he gave me his copy of *The Bad Life* (*La Vie Mauvaise*, the original version which was published in 2005), the memoir by Frédéric Mitterand, a nephew of President François Mitterand. I have always enjoyed reading the memoirs of gay men, especially those prominent in the world of entertainment and sports such as Richard Chamberlain, Tab Hunter, and Greg Louganis. Mitterand fits the former category, although with the sobriquet of 'high culture' added since he distinguished himself for many years as a producer of what one might call art and indie movies. A tone of melancholy underlies the whole memoir—in this respect, only Richard Chamberlain's memoir approaches it—for Mitterand, as he himself readily admits, never found the one true love, as one might say, with whom he might have shared much of his life. Mitterand writes beautifully==a fact that also comes through in the translation—and, most striking of all, combines almost paradoxically a spirit of utter frankness about his own sexuality, which never, however, descends to a tell-all tawdriness, with a refined sense of discretion—shown above all in his life-long adoration of Catherine Deneuve—a combination I find very characteristic of French high culture. I have really taken to Mitterand's feeling for and rendering of milieu: his extended family in all its eccentricities, trials and tribulations, upper middle class French society, the settings and timelines of his work, the gay world, past and present, of Paris, and, last but not least, the for pay-for male-to-young male sex attractions of Bangkok and Jakarta. This is indeed a superb work of literature.

Sept. 29

I could not resist sending an email today to friends and family in order to relate what I had been told at the Acadia University Library last Friday. I wanted to take out a book and thought I would be able to go into the stacks myself to find it and take it to the front desk for signing out. However, I learned that the stacks were still closed. In any case, it turned out the Library did not have a copy but Dalhousie did and I could have it. However, the book would have to go into quarantine—that was the word used—at the Wolfville public library for seven (!) days after which I could pick it at up there, but only on a Thursday. Certainly a reductio ad absurdum in the precautions taken against the spread of the virus. We all had a good laugh at it.

I have started to read Lucan's *The Civil War*, using the close but still very good literary translation by D.J. Duff, with a continual eye on the Latin original.

Sept. 30

What a debate that was last night. "combative and chaotic," as CNN put it. There is no need to repeat what was said by some of the commentators. Right from the beginning, even before he started to speak, the expression on Trump's face, pinched, grim, anxious, signalled clearly what

was going on in his mind. Biden's performance was hardly faultless but he held everything together. I liked the fact that at certain times he addressed himself to the viewers and indeed to the nation as a whole, especially at the end: much called for and very effective. I am eager to see what the polls will be saying.

October 3

Watched two great movies yesterday. Last evening at Glenn's place, *The Boys of Brazil* (he had it on dvd). This was the third time I watched it. The first time, many years ago on television, then about a year ago, also on Glenn's dvd. This superbly acted and filmed 1978 movie is, in my opinion, one of the greatest thriller films I have ever seen, worth watching many times over, and now in this age of accelerating biotechnology, including the breathtaking but also ominous possibilities held out by cloning, has specially urgent relevance.

The other movie, *A Hidden Life*, which thanks to HBO I was able to watch yesterday afternoon at home, was overlong==nearly three hours long if you include the credits—but even so. this true story of Franz, an Austrian small farmer who in WWII days refused, on the basis on his Christian conscience, to swear the mandatory oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler when he was inducted into the Austrian army, persisted in his principled obstinacy, and thus incurred the death penalty, is very moving. Much of the story is set and beautifully filmed in a countryside and rural village almost suggestive of a pre-industrial age, against the awesome background of the Austrian Alps. I liked the distinct and contrasting ways in which the German and the English language were used, the former for the beautiful singing and the saying of prayers but also for the brutalizing language of the prison guards, and for all the talking and shouting which expressed the inevitable lack of understanding rising up in the community over Franz's stand. The latter, the English language as used in this movie, is very sparing of words and spoken slowly, sometimes simply conveying not-uttered thoughts and feelings; this is a language always animated by thought and reflection, the language of Franz and his wife Fani, but also of secondary characters such as village priest and his bishop, the judicial authorities who are not completely hostile to Franz, and a few of Franz's fellow prisoners. Here the language assumes an almost hieratic quality; for me, this use of language carried a great psychological and even spiritual impact. I would love to know what prompted the author of the film script to make this choice.

October 5

Over the past few days in the 10th month of this roller coaster year I have been casting my thoughts 50 years back to the signal year 1970 in my life when I came out as a gay man. In April and May I had a few sexual encounters which left, to put it mildly, a most unpleasant taste in my mouth, leaving me in serious doubt whether I was doing the right thing. However, I pressed on and at the end of June I met Brian. It was much more than sex now but a growing love between the two of us. At the beginning of September we moved into a nice one-bedroom apartment on Bernard Avenue within easy walking distance of the U. of T. campus where I was working on my PhD; two more apartments were to follow over the next 5 ½ years. By the end of the year we found ourselves in the thick of the burgeoning gay and lesbian movement as members of the steering committee of CHAT, the Community Homophile Association of Toronto. When I look

back on that year, I inevitably rank as it one of the most momentous years of my life, second only to the year of immigration, 1958. However, as also comes out in my memoirs, all the years of my life I ultimately live by Spinoza's *sub specie aeternitatis*, "from the perspective of eternity," and St Augustine's *fides quaerens inntellectum*, "faith seeking understanding." This often comes with an inward struggle of thought and feeling, but the struggle itself is supremely meaningful and validated by a profound hope that all will be well.

October 6

Two movies watched yesterday, both courtesy of HBO. I looked forward to *Robert the Bruce* as a kind of sequel to the 1990's *Braveheart*, which had Mel Gibson starring in the role of William Wallace fighting for Scottish independence from England. The recent movie continues the story. I googled just to check the basic factuality of the movie, which it basically has while also having its share of fictional events and characters. This is most certainly a fine movie worth watching. Two things stood out for me. First, the film was shot mainly in Montana; this worked for me, but I did have the sense while watching that the landscape didn't look quite Scottish. Second, I was struck by the climactic role played by Iver, a young woman, an expert with the bow and arrow who, near the end, is successful in killing nearly all of the Bruce's enemies who have set upon him to kill him. Fighting women with the requisite physical and combat skills have become a staple in some movies. According to my recollection, the trend started with the popular television series of a few decades ago, *Xena the Princess Warrior*.

I also enjoyed *Hope Gap*, a domestic serio-comedy set in a contemporary English town next to the iconic White Cliffs of Dover. Surprisingly, the central role of Grace, who finds her husband Edward drifting away from her and then suddenly learns he is romantically involved with ananother woman, is played by Annette Bening; I had always thought her of as American. In any case, she plays her character perfectly. This is a low-key drama with just the balance of seriousness and humour, the latter most at the expense of, and self inflicted by Grace, a 60-ish devout Catholic who stubbornly refuses to accept her marriage is over, at one point saying she'd rather be a war widow, for then she'd be enjoying the respect of her community.

October 8

Finished reading Lucan's *The Civil War* two days ago, having read it from the beginning to the end. In the past, I am afraid, I had read more about it than of it. I am really sorry it never appeared on the reading list of any of undergraduate or graduate Latin course I took. This is what I would call the work of a precocious word-artist: Lucan probably completed it shortly before his suicide at the age of 25. Yes, this is an over the top epic, unique in ancient Greek and Roman literature: not only is it focused on a historical topic—that is a distinction it shares with Silius Italicus' *Punica*—but it does so from a fiercely partisan and ideological point of view: *Libertas* as fought for by Pompey and his senatorial followers versus Tyranny as epitomized by the rebel Julius Caesar and his military hordes, who will put the Roman people under the yoke of slavery. There is no subtlety or nuancing in this dichotomy. The gross flattery of Nero in the prologue might deceive the unwary reader or listener (the poem, by the way, is tailor-made for high-pitched declamation), but I agree with other critics there is already covert satire here at the

expense of the still young but already corpulent Nero; later on, the poet-narrator also roundly ridicules the practice of posthumous deification of emperors.

The poetry of excess: dozens of most graphically described ways to expire grievously wounded in combat as in the naval battle near Massilia; the ghoulish witch Erichtho and her macabre rite of necromancy for the purpose of reanimating a fresh corpse, who is compelled thereby to foretell the outcome of the next day's decisive battle of Pharsalia; and last but not least, the agonizing and spectacularly described deaths of many of Cato's soldiers bitten by a host of exotic poisonous snakes in the Libyan desert. The best parts, though, are the speeches—orations of grandiosity I would call made of them—by Pompey, Caesar,and their respective followers, above all the superbly portrayed Cato. They amply demonstrate what a natural medium Latin is for rhetorical display. Here Lucan is at his very best.

Earlier this afternoon I picked up—on interlibrary loan from Dalhousie University — the second volume of Klemperer's WWII diary, which covers the years 1942-1945. I have it now in the English translation; The original German I have on loan from Chris. It will make for very absorbed reading over the next few weeks especially since I can now read the translation with a close eye on the original German. I will also move forward to the three remaining epic poems of post-Augustan literature, although I don't think they will have the strong impact on me as *The Civil War* did; I might even be bored.

October 11

Watched a HBO documentary, *Planet of the Humans*, last night which had a truly alarming message.
Michael Moore was the producer producer and Jeffs Gibbs did much of the first-hand research, wrote the script, and was the narrator. Solar panels and wind turbines will never be adequate providers of clean, renewable energy. Much resort will still have to made to natural gas, a fossil fuel of course. The turbines and panels have to be replaced periodically, every 20-25 years, necessitating over and over again the use of materials the production of which is not environmentally friendly. The docu shows a large field of disused panels, a wasteland now, and a huge collection of abandoned, rusted turbines. Most alarming is the increasing resort to the so-called biomass, which, of course, consists of the pulverized wood of cut down trees. Logging for this purpose is already taking place on a massive scale across the planet. I have seen it with my own eyes in Nova Scotia and elsewhere in Canada, So much for the conservation of nature and for climate control. It is sad to see the private sector—now supposedly so 'green' friendly—making more and more capital out of this wanton destruction, and even an iconic institution such as Sierra having apparently little trouble with it. Very sadly, the huge crowds of people celebrating their once-a-year Earth Day choose to remain blissfully unconcerned.

October 15

The confirmation hearing for Judge Amy Coney Barrett by the American Senate is a sad charade, a totally unwarranted and grossly unethical power grab by Trump and the Republican senators, for whom might is obviously right. Fortunately, for myself I have been most heartened by the hard hitting and often eloquent counterarguments made by the Democrats. It is certain that the

nominee will be confirmed, but if Biden wins the presidency and the Democrats win a majority in the Senate this outcome will not be the end of the story.

I have nearly finished my reading of Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, using the text and excellent translation provided by H.D. Mozley in the Loeb Classical Library series. His translation, while by means a literal one, stays close to the Latin and with its resort to archaic literary idiom captures well the tone of the elevated and rhetorically heightened language of the original. I have refreshed my memory of Apollonius of Rhodius' *Argonautica*, the Hellenistic epic of three centuries earlier which obviously served as Flaccus' principal model. I have to admit that I have now a slight preference for Apollonius' work. For instance, the story of how Aeetes, the king of Colchis, tricked Jason and his men into joining him in the crucial battle—fought within sight of the city—with his Scythian enemies, a drawn out battle which takes up nearly all of book six of Flaccus' work and is only a mediocre pastiche of the combat scenes in Homer's *Iliad*, is mercifully absent from Apollonius. (But Mozley is right in his introduction that Flaccus must have written it in order to gratify Roman tastes.) For my taste—but of course I do not speak for the expectations of educated Romans of more than 1900 years ago—the Latin *Argonautica* is clogged with recondite references to mythical figures and to peoples and places encountered by the Argonauts in their voyage. Unlike Mozley, I don't think that in his portrayal of Medea Flaccus improves on his predecessor; however, I do agree that Flaccus' Jason is a far more commanding and heroic figure. The last part of Flaccus' epic which would have narrated the Argo's circuitous voyage back to Greek soil has been lost, but I like Mozley's suggestion that it would have reflected the far more accurate knowledge that Romans of the first century A.D. had of the geography of Europe.

October 19

Read Michael Cohen's *Disloyal* in one day two days ago. A fascinating but deeply troubled story of how a highly intelligent and educated man, well established in his upwardly mobile career, and blessed with a wonderful wife and children allowed himself to be so enthralled by Donald Trump as to develop a remarkable professional and personal relationship with him and to become his chief 'fixer' for many years, playing a Dr Faustus, so to speak, to his Mephistopheles. Beyond its personal dimension, it offers also a disturbing glimpse into a deeply corrupted American society, where this President still commands the unwavering support of approximately 40% of the population, educated—just watch the Fox Channel—and non-educated alike.

What a sad, grim story this is, the bitter clash in our province between non-indigenous lobster fishermen and their Mi'kma'qi rivals, as they are perceived now by the former, a conflict which has led to alarming vandalism, violence, and even arson. What disturbs me is not only the fragrantly criminal behaviour of many of the non-indigenous fishermen—I say this even though I empathize to some degree with their grievances— but also the fact this eruption could have been easily foreseen by the federal ministry of indigenous services, which has the necessary authority and should have brought the two parties together well beforehand: instead, inaction and now the inevitable handwringing. The damage has been done and it remains to be seen how much of it can be repaired.

October 23

Have been reading Statius' *Thebaid* at a fast clip for almost a week, the first five of the total twelve and should slow down a bit now or even take a break. I had read bits and pieces of it before but these past days have been a real eye-opener. Nowhere else in the classical Latin literature I have read is there such an overwhelming number of powerfully descriptive passages—only Lucretius comes close—sunrise, sunset, a brilliant night sky, raging storms and seas whipped up by them, landscapes idyllic or desolate, the hideous Underworld, warriors arming and armed for battle, scenes of bloody combat, distraught and maddened women, vividly portrayed gods and goddesses most often callous and even malevolent—the list can go on much longer. The author frequently stretches the semantics and syntax of the language to their limits. For this reason, I have kept an even closer eye on the Latin, although I have used H.D. Mozley's translation in the Loeb Classical Library series--the language, as one might expect, is old-fashioned but accurate—and the very attractive contemporary translation by Jane Wilson Joyce. After the prologue extravagantly, as one might expect, eulogizing the emperor Domitian, the story starts with the half-mad Oedipus—sequestered in a hidden room in the royal palace—about to pronounce his fatal curse on his two sons contending for the kingship of Thebes. This scene certainly sets the clamorous tragic tone of the *Thebaid* as a whole in motion and launches a dark vision of the worlds of gods and goddesses and of men and women which has no equal in classical Latin.

October 25

I will indeed slow down my marathon reading of the *Thebaid* now that I have just finished book six. This will allow me above all to get back to the second volume of Victor Klrmperer's WWII diary into which I have so far only dipped. I expect to finish reading today a fascinating book Glenn has lent me.

October 27

As a result of just finishing my reading of Scott Shane's, *A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone*, the terrorist being Anwar Al Awlaki, who was killed by a drone in 2011 on the specific order of President Obama, I have been doing some reflection on the motivational power of delusion. Awlaki's delusion, which of course became murderous over just a few years, was that Muslims all over the world were under the unrelenting attack from the West, especially from the United States, and that therefore the only right response, willed by God himself, was a violent jihad which would not hesitate to resort to the mass killing of "kuffar," "unbelievers." "God wills it," said also the Crusaders marching to liberate the Holy Land, and also thought the men of the Inquisition as they tortured heretics and Jews, and even Hitler could at times work a reference to divine providence into some of his rants. And now we have seen, for years already, the large majority of America's so-called evangelical Christians hailing President Trump as a messiah specially chosen by God to put the nation back on the right track again, socially, politically, and even morally.

As I read in Michael Cohen's recent published memoir, *Disloyal,* Trump doesn't take all this 'religious stuff' too seriously, but he most certainly believes that he is the only man who can

make and is indeed making "America great again." And this fact justifies in his mind the most outrageous lies coming from his lips; in fact, lying has become such a habit with him that I suspect he at least half- believes his own lies. CNN reported an almost unbelievably outrageous example on last night's news where I saw and heard Trump saying at one his rallies that doctors were inflating the numbers of the people who died of the coronavirus in order to make more money—I have quoted this pretty well verbatim, Madness! But tens of millions of Americans take this sort of thing as gospel truth.

October 29

Thanks to TCM watched a great 1964 movie last night with a political theme and message that is even more timely today: William Russell played by Henry Fonda vying with Joe Cantwell (Cliff Robertson) for the Party's nomination for the Presidency, the winner virtually certain to win the election as well.
William Russell: 50ish, intellectual, liberal, and highly ethical. Joe Cantwell: 40ish, a well to the right populist, promising a southern governor he'll go easy on ending segregation and ready to stoop to dirty tricks including blackmailing Russell. This was the first time I saw the movie and so the ending was a very pleasant surprise, even though Russell did not get the nomination. Nice to know that Gore Vidal wrote the screenplay.

October 31

Just finished watching, courtesy of two DVD disks, the final episode of *The Forsyte Saga,* the 2002 -3 BBC television series. Compelling story, great acting, and superb production—you wouldn't expect anything else from the Brits. I have not read John Galsworthy's trilogy of novels of the same name, but have the third and final, *To Let*, in my library, and will give it a quick go-through in order to see, in part at least, if the essence of the story has been captured by the tv series.

Later this evening: In the tv series, Soames is the central character, from the beginning to the end. *To Let,* too, starts and ends with him. Irene. Both in the tv adaptation and in *To Let* I did not find him an altogether unsympathetic figure, rigid, yes, and top heavy with Victorian-era upper middle class values and prejudices, but possessing an ultimate integrity and a final readiness to reflect calmly on his past and to learn from his mistakes, as we see at the end of both *To Let* and the tv series, where he makes his peace, mentally in the former and in person in the latter, with Irene, his first wife.

November 2

Have completed my reading of volume 2 of Victor Klemperer's life for a Jew in Nazi Germany diary, and the comments I made in my earlier entry stand even more strongly. What perseverance and courage he and his non-Jewish wife Eva showed in the face of unrelenting Nazi persecution, which grew even more cruel after they were forced to abandon their rural home near Dresden and move into a "Jews' house" in the city. It was again good to read, though, that even then they would encounter kindness and helpfulness from compatriots whose minds had not been poisoned by the Jew hatred constantly stoked up by the Nazis. The climax of their

ordeal but also the beginning of their liberation came with the firestorm bombing of Dresden on February 13 and 14, 1945, when amidst the harrowing destruction and chaos they were able to escape from the city. The lengthy entry Klemperer made in his diary afterwards is a masterpiece of vivid, dramatic writing carried to the highest pitch imaginable, What followed was for them an nearly four months odyssey across a sizable part of Germany, a wandering which was still fraught with danger and hardship, especially during the many weeks the Nazis still made their presence felt, but the surprisingly laconic—but perhaps therefore all the more effective emotionally—final sentence of the diary's last entry on June 9 shows that they made safely it to their home, which was in good condition having been well watched over by their neighbours.

November 3

Unlike four years ago I will be going to bed tonight at my normal time, being cautiously optimistic I'll be waking up early tomorrow morning to good news for Joe Biden and the Democratic Party as a whole. I certainly hope the results will not be dragged out for days, let alone weeks.

Have resumed my reading of the *Thebaid* and should be finished be before the next weekend. By now I am appreciating the uniqueness of Statius' poetic style and manner while at the same time recognizing that his epic represents the swansong of the mythological epic in classical Greek and Roman literature.
More detailed comments later.

November 7

Well, when I woke up early Wednesday morning and turned on CNN, I saw right away that my cautious optimism was misplaced: Trump was only slightly behind Biden in the popular vote and with the way the still incomplete vote count stood in a number of states it looked like a real possibility that Trump would win a second term. Incredible: how low had the United States of America had sunk! Three days later now this state of affairs has reversed: Biden now has a respectable lead in the popular vote—although still much lower than the polls had been predicting—and, thanks to the many millions of mailed-in votes heavily resorted to by Democrats and which at this moment are still being counted, it is virtually certain now that Biden will win the Electoral College too. So my mind is somewhat at rest now. However, it is still almost beyond belief to me hat the Republicans—and both a cowardly and a 'might is right' bunch they almost all are—did surprisingly well in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Biden has a massive job ahead of him, but I trust both his heart and intelligence to do the best job possible in these trying times.

And now back to the epic poems of the so-called Silver Age in the history of classical Latin literature. I finished the *Thebaid* a few days ago and yesterday read the first of the 17 (!) books of Silius Italicus' *Punica*. In my last entry I characterized the former as representing the swan song of classical Latin epic poetry and I stand by that. The *Thebaid* radiates a dark splendour in its lavishly freighted descriptions of the natural world and of the divine and human worlds in all their manifestations and interactions, and for me, as I approached the end of my reading, it acquired a special resonance in the loving description of the shrine to Clementia in mythical

Athens, a much needed consoling antipode to the brutal violence that dominates most of the rest of the poem. The *Punica*, however, I would already at this point characterize as a last gasp of the genre and I will therefore skim through it very quickly. Silius was an amateur and al he could do reasonably well was to write metrically correct dactylic hexameters. The translation I am using is that by J.D. Duff in the Loeb Classical Library series. In his Introduction he notes a few episodes which he says have poetic merit, and so I am waiting to be convinced.

November 8

Courtesy of HBO, I was able to begin to watch late last night and finish watching early this morning a movie, *Burden*, which resonated just right with the inspirational victory speeches of Kamala Harris and Joe Biden. Based on a true story set in the American South in the 1990's as is shown in the credits at the end of the movie, it is the story of Mike Burden, a young white man, poor and uneducated like so many of his peers, who has been drawn into a revived KKK chapter which has set up a "Redneck" KKK museum in the town. Tom, the leader, is a kind of father figure here who considers and treats Mike like his adopted son. Mike's girlfriend Judy, a single mother, has reservations about the Klan and persuades Mike to take his first baby-steps towards his existential transformation so that he in fact quits the Klan. Now he finds himself treated like a pariah by his former peers and indeed by the white community as a whole. Mike and Judy and her little son Franklin are rescued, as it were, by the minister, magnificently played by Forest Whittaker, of a local black church, and thus starts the at times still rocky journey for Mike towards his spiritual rebirth, beautifully climaxed in his river baptism witnessed by the entire congregation.

November 9

I woke up very early this morning, around 3 am, and could not get soon back to sleep, as sometimes happens. I got up to make a cup of tea and started to think about my first school year in Canada. I have vivid memories of that year and of the three teachers who made a big impression on me, but the name of my home room teacher, Mrs MacCallum, my favourite, had slipped my mind. So for the first time since I completed my memoirs exactly four years ago—and then the following January had it printed up in copies for my brothers and sisters—I turned to my copy and found her name. I did some paging through the book and found, to my great satisfaction, it still read very well. In the summer of 2017 my brother Gerrit constructed a beautiful website for me which contains the text of my memoir as well as that of the twenty essays I started to write right after the completion of my earlier book. I am thinking now of calling the attention of a wider readership to my memoir and will try to do this through *De Krant*, the Dutch language monthly for Dutch Canadians and Dutch Americans, to which I have subscribed for over 20 years. A letter of mine written to the editor and published in the *De Krant* should take care of it.

Now that I am well into my reading of the *Punica* my estimation of Silius Italicus' epic poem on the mighty and fateful war between Rome and Carthage—the second and by far the greatest of the three wars between these two imperial nations— has grown considerably, much the same as

happened with my reading of the *Thebaid,* and I am reading it a little more slowly and carefully now. In a matter of days I should be able to render my final judgment.

November 12

I will finish my reading of the *Punica* later this day. What a pleasant surprise for me has been this historical epic, which is considered a mediocre work by nearly every classicist I know of who has bothered to comment on it. My experience with it has been identical to the one I had in response to the *Thebaid*. Even before I started to read the latter, I thought that as a mythologically based epic it was an anachronism by the late 1st century A.D, remembering the scorn Juvenal had already heaped on this type of poetry in the first of his *Satires.* However, the overwhelming vividness of Statius' narrative and descriptive style grew on me as my reading progressed. Yes, as I said in my earlier entry, the *Thebaid* is indeed the swansong of mythological epic in Greek and Roman literature but it is certainly a splendid finale.

I must say now that I much prefer the *Punica* to Lucan's *Civil War*, although I must keep in mind that the latter as we have it is unfinished. I thought at first that I would not like the way Silius Italicus retained the traditional epic panoply of gods, goddess, and semi-divinities which Lucan had not kept and rightly so in the view of the fact that he was telling the story of events which had happened a little more than a century earlier. However, Silius was reaching back three centuries back into a past which over time must have a acquired in Roman patriotic minds an almost legendary quality. Like Lucan, Silius is lavish with hyperbole in the battle scenes, as he is elsewhere, but he avoids on the whole the blood and gore excess which at times becomes grotesque in the *Civil War.* Finally, and this is what I enjoyed the most about the *Punica,* is while Lucan's epic makes do with two central heroes, Caesar and Pompey, with the Younger Cato coming in perhaps as a third, Silius provides us not only with the grand Hannibal and the even grander Scipio Africanus, who is not surprisingly the epic's towering hero, but additionally comes with a memorable long line-up of Roman and Carthaginian generals, their respective successes and failures described in rich detail.

November 16

In my last entry I which I spoke of Victor Klemperer, I should have praised him once more for continuing to work, under increasingly more trying conditions, on his academic projects, above all his study of 18th century French literature which underlined the towering achievements of the *philosophes*. (I am also fascinated by his other great project, *Lingua Tertii Imperii*,"The Language of the Third Reich," wondering if it ever got published.) Klemperer came immediately to mind when in a Halifax bookstore three days ago I spotted a newly published book, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, by Andrew Curran, which I bought and have since then read. I had been quite familiar with Voltaire and Rousseau but Diderot, the genius of the *Encyclopédie,* had been little more than a name to me. Now I fully recognize his unabashed radicalism, above all his complete break with Christianity, opting, regrettably, for an unapologetic atheism.

Yesterday, as Chris, Glenn, and I were making our way back home, we stopped to check the Costco outlet in aa Halifax suburb Chris gave Glenn and me one-hour tour of this vast

emporium. It had its good points, including a much better a fish counter than I have ever seen at the local supermarket, but as a whole this colossal space crawling with thousands of customers diligently pushing their shopping carts, a testimony to North American gigantism also in retail marketing, was not at all to my taste. In contrast, for the typical shopper there, spending much of his or her Sunday afternoon there, the experience may have had an almost religious uplift.

November 18

Already some time ago, I decided that once I had finished my reading of Roman epic poetry of the first century, I would turn to Latin prose writing, starting with Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, which I had never read before, except in bits and pieces. These essays, unlike Seneca's tragedies, were entirely left out of both my undergraduate and graduate studies—a great pity when one considers the acclaim they enjoyed in the writings of some of Latin church fathers and in notable authors of the late Middle Ages and the 16th and 17th centuries. I have made a start now, fortunate in that I have in my library both a good modern translation of many of the essays in the Penguin Classics series and, even more important, a Latin text with an excellent lengthy Introduction as well as copious notes.

November 21

I have finished *The Future of Humanity* by Michio Kaku, a recent (2018) book which I was fortunate to spot at the public library in Kentville two weeks ago. Dr Kaku is a highly respected theoretical physicist renowned as co-discoverer of the so-called string theory, a 'hot' new branch of subatomic physics He opens up mesmerizing vistas of how humanity, armed with ever escalating developments and discoveries in science and technology, might be faring a century, then thousands of years, and even millions of years from now, opening up these distant horizons through his constructs of Civilization 0 (the present era) and then proceeding through Civilizations 1, 2, 3, and even, in my opinion, a phantasmagorical Civilization 4, when humanity, long since a concourse of unimaginably powerful and fast—moving faster than the speed of light!—but completely disembodied minds, makes contact with an ultimate, multi-universe reality.

The central thesis of Kaku's work is that humanity must branch out from its home planet and colonize the universe, if it wishes to avoid its inevitable extinction which must come when a colossal cataclysm such as has taken place before—e.g. a giant meteor or the explosion of a super-volcano—hits the Earth.

As I read through Dr Kaku's enthralling futuristic prophecies, I could not help but be reminded of Jacques Ellul's sober-minded, sharply cautionary assessment of contemporary science and technology which I brought forward in two of my essays which are posted on my website; I am thinking especially of his *The Technological Bluff*, which I thought when I first read it decades ago, was the sour grapes of a curmurdgeonly Luddite, but now respect for its fundamental insight, namely that, more than anything else, humanity must get its house in order, so to speak, morally and spiritually, if many of the breathtaking advances of our era in science and technology—think, for instance, of the digital revolution and its ubiquitous spin-off, the social

media—are not to have, as indeed they already most visibly have, their inevitable repercussions of disorder, chaos, and even sheer evil-doing in our world.

November 23

It looks like I have almost done with Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* since, on the whole, I am experiencing a faint sense of disappointment over them. With only one exception among the ten essays I have read so far, I find they are almost all little more than rhetorical elaborations of commonplaces already abundantly present in earlier literature, whether poetry or prose. The notes and commentary of the edition I am using make this quite clear. Only no. 33, struck me as really original: true wisdom draws on true knowledge and understanding, not simply repeating and regurgitating the sayings and ideas of others, not even the most prestigious of these, and relying entirely on them as our supreme authorities. This insight is as valid now as it was 2000 years ago. I will read three more essays which, at this point, look promising; one of them, no. 47, a plea for the humane and respectful treatment of slaves, I already read years ago, and the sentiment it expresses is not unique in the literature of classical antiquity, but Seneca vividly relates the stubborn prejudices against slaves and the vicious abuses of power they suffered in his own upper class milieu, while at the same time forcefully underlining the common humanity of master and slave.

As far as the so-called "pointed," i.e. epigrammatic style the *Epistulae* is concerned, I have also mixed feelings. Classical Latin certainly lends itself to succinctness of expression, but, in my opinion, Seneca at times overdoes the penchant for concision, at the expense of clarity, while his longer, more complex sentences do not always flow as well as they typically do in the prose literature of earlier generations. At its best though, I do have an affinity for the "pointed" style.

I am also keenly aware of the criticisms which have been levelled in more recent centuries against the alleged disingenuousness behind Seneca's praise of a frugal, non-materialistic life-style, this coming from an individual who, largely because of his prominent position at the imperial court, was able to amass for himself a huge fortune—made, among others, from lending large sums of money to provincial communities at exorbitant rates of interest. Even worse, there is also his silence over the suspicious deaths of Nero's stepfather—also his adoptive father—the emperor Claudius, and of Nero's stepbrother Britannicus, and over the murder of Agrippina commissioned by her son, the now emperor Nero, whose tutor Seneca was for years. Consequently, Seneca no longer commands the uncritical respect he used to.

What is next? I am thinking of the writings of the Latin church fathers which I have in my library.

And last but not least: Last night a dream, a happy dream, the first in months, with Scott in it.

November 27

I have started on St Augustine's *Confessions*. I am using two translations, Rex Warner's and R.S. Pine-Coffin's (the latter in the Penguin Classics series). The former already strikes me as keeping a little more closely to the Latin original. I am using as my Latin text a 19th century

publication which has a rather small print so that I won't be using as enthusiastically as I would otherwise; unfortunately, getting a better text in this respect from the Acadia Library would be accompanied by so much bureaucratic hassle because of the pandemic that I'll make do with what I have.

It is already obvious to me that the *Confessions* is only in part an autobiography but, above all, an extended meditation on the relationship between God and wo/man, and St Augustine's mastery of rhetoric as a teacher, preacher, and writer springs into the eye right from the beginning.

At the same time, I am starting to read Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, this time from the beginning to the very end. I am fortunate to have the complete work—including Gibbon's footnotes—in an attractive modern edition which comes with a no less than a 100 page Introduction.

November 28
Yesterday, Black Friday, the day after the American Thanksgiving; what an idiotic term immediately suggestive of a stock market crash rather than the supposed fact that on this day the Christmas shopping season goes into full swing and most stores and shops will finally in the year be running in the 'black' obliterating the 'red' of the previous months. It is sad to see that that this coinage is now also widely used in our country.

Dec. 1

The director of the School of Music announced today the death yesterday of Professor James Ferrell Sugg who taught voice in the School for 22 years. The official obituary said that he was 89 and detailed Jim\s impressive professional qualifications and achievements during the American phase of his career before he came to Acadia in the 1970's. Scott and I got to know him well in the following decade, taking a strong liking to his warm personality, and were invited a number of times to his apartment in Wolfville. The most memorable time, however, we spent with him came in the summer of 1985. Scott and I had been going through a very rough patch in our relationship and when Jim learned of it he invited us to spend a day with him at a cottage on the Bay of Fundy. We were so much uplifted by the beautiful surroundings and, above all, by his good judgment, advice and humour that we went home happy and reconciled. The obituary said he died in Lunenburg on the South Shore, so he must eventually have established himself there. (I somehow thought he had gone back permanently to the U.S. since he intimated he would in his later conversations.) If I had known, I certainly would have paid a visit. Even so, thanks so much to him, I will always have my grateful memory of that day of healing on the Bay of Fundy, and I like to think that Jim had many years of enjoyable retirement in beautiful Lunenburg.

Dec. 3

My start on Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has been less than impressive, for I've been mostly skimming through it. Decades ago already I had read the first 16 chapters covering the period from the reign of Commodus to Constantine's rise to power, the last two of these devoted to the rise of Christianity before the so-called Constantinian revolution. Even

then, while I found it often engaging as narrative historiography in the grand manner, I was less taken by its 18th century prose style. I appreciated why many a reader might regard it as magisterial, but for me it grew increasingly wearisome. Gibbon's work is certainly one of prodigious learning, the summit of 16th, 17th, and earlier 18th century European historiography on the subject of Rome and its empire, but it is no substitute for the knowledge and insights offered by modern scholarship. Chapters 15 and 16 on the rise of Christianity are vitiated by the author's Deist-inclined religious perspective in which he does not hesitate to descend at times to irony and barely disguised mockery at the expense of the faith and praxis of the early Christians; even the Church Fathers as a whole do not command his respect. His is above all the classist perspective of a cultivated 18th English gentleman who has no empathy for anything that smacks of 'enthusiasm'— inevitably paired with credulity and superstition—in matters of religion.

The skimming, though, has paid off in benefits for me, for now I have a much more detailed idea of the contents of Gibbon's work as a whole in all its highways and byways over almost 1300 years of history. I must go back to Gibbon, for despite his prejudices and limitations he is not devoid of genuine insights on the subject of Rome's decline and fall which are echoed in modern historiography..

Dec. 5

Mary Beard's *SPQR*, which I bought a few days ago and have just finished reading, is an introduction to Roman history which I would enthusiastically set as the principal text for a first-year course on the subject. Its approach is unconventional in that it starts *medias in res*, namely with the so-called Catiline conspiracy of 63 BC. The chapters of her book as a whole do not follow a strictly chronological order but rather are thematic. I really appreciate how differently and fruitfully the story of Rome and its empire can be told nowadays. In every respect Beard's book is radically different from Gibbon's masterpiece, for it draws on the wide range of evidence offered by what are now the subdisciplines of archaeology, art history, numismatics, epigraphy, and papyrology which hardly or not at all existed in the 18th century, and this permits the author to place before the reader an incisive, contemporary-minded commentary which takes in the breadth of Roman society and culture, rather than a traditional political and military historiography (Beard had already distinguished herself early on by her scholarship on Roman religion). Beard is a fine example of the engaged scholar who makes extensive use of the media of television and the internet in order to bring the ancient Greco-Roman world, in her case especially the Roman half of it, to the attention of a wide public, as she strongly and rightly believes that the study of the history of Rome and its empire holds out valuable insights into issues of central importance for our contemporary world.

December 7

When I drove with Chris to Halifax yesterday I was still weighed by down by the sad news I had received from Ingrid three days earlier in an email directed at all the siblings, namely that further tests had shown that Marvin's cancer was terminal and that he had not much left to live. I still could not help but think that how cruel it was that Marv—that big guy with the big heart—would not have many good years of retirement, together with Ingrid, to look forward to. Marv and Ingrid: they sure belonged together. The email Ingrid sent out was short and factual but it was

not difficult to imagine how devastated she must be—that was confirmed by Lida when she called me yesterday evening. The sadness— and it had become once more a mild depression— did not go away until, after Chris had done his two shopping errands, we arrived at the Harry DeWolf Park on the Bedford Basin; there Chris would go jogging while I would go for a short walk and then find a bench where I could sit down and read a book. It was very windy, while the temperature was obviously going down, so not much came of sitting down and reading a book, and therefore I resumed walking, with and into the wind. I found the wind exceptionally bracing, and gradually my sadness and near-depression disappeared. It was as though the gusty wind represented Life at its fullest and it, Life, was embracing me and all those I loved and indeed all of humanity, and I felt the peace that comes through the grace of God Over the past few days I had sought comfort in prayer and meditation, and these had certainly helped me, but now I felt the fullness of faith and hope and of the Light which shines in the darkness, A day later, my sadness and my deep feeling for Marv and Ingrid very much remain, but the Light continues to shine,

Dec. 9

A few days ago I finished reading St Augustine's *Confessions*. I read it in Rex Warner's excellent—close to the Latin—translation but with an eye on the Latin text. The translation in the Penguin Classics translation is generally quite good but, for me, as I said earlier, it came sometimes too close to paraphrase. This was the first time I read this truly unique wok of a Latin Church Father completely, and I thoroughly agree with the consensus that this is a magnificent classic of Christian spirituality, Augustine's memoir of his life's journey towards and inside the Christian faith has struck me as combining an exquisitely probing intelligence and a richly orchestrated emotive power; his training and expertise in rhetoric certainly served him well. Books 10 and 11 dealing respectively with memory and time are classics of philosophy and psychology. Book 11 stands out above anything else written in ancient literature for how Augustine unwraps the human sense of time, of present, past, and future, how in the human mind these three dimensions of time continuously stream into one another, and how this supremely subjective experiencing of time is a uniquely human capacity.

Augustine's Latinity is superb, at least as eloquent and powerful as in that in Cicero's orations but without the often patently staged hyperbole of the latter. I really like his continual and skilful interweaving of biblical quotations taken especially from the Psalms, into his well-flowing sentences. One sentence in book 10—I had read it before but now for the first time in its context—will always stick in my mind—it is one of the most beautiful lines I have ever read, in any literature whether poetry or prose: sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi: what a breathtaking outpouring here to God of St Augustine 's love of God.

Books 12 and 13 in which Augustine reflects on God's creation of heaven and earth as told in the first chapter of Genesis certainly have exegetical value, in especially in showing that he has room for alternative interpretations, but they are replete with the kind of allegorical and figurative readings of Scripture of which other Church Fathers also are fond and which in fact represent an intellectual legacy coming from Greek philosophy, especially Platonism and Stoicism. In our age we would much rather, and quite rightly, have a look at what science has to offer.

Finally, there is Augustine's understanding, based on his own experience of sexuality. It is guilt-ridden and, in my opinion, one of his most questionable legacies to the Christian world; in fact, Augustine himself here drew on a conception of the body-spirit antithesis which comes to us also as a legacy of ancient Platonism and Stoicism. The basic idea underlying Augustine's condemnation of sexual desire is that the erotic capacity of sinful man is corrupted by a fatally weakened will that is the inevitable result of man's fall into sin: any desire for physical intimacy is acceptable in the eyes of God only if it is for the purpose of procreation and absolutely subject to and controlled by a unblemished godly will such as sinful man does not have. However, as I and many other Christians now see it, human eroticism and sexual desire are a part of the natural order created by God: even aside from the larger societal and cultural context, it has an involuntary—we might say, instinctual—aspect in every individual's life which is inescapable, and in this respect, therefore, the question of guilt does not apply. It is up to each of us throughout our life's journey, to live our capacity for sex and eroticism in an ethically responsible way—responsible to the other persons we may be sexually attracted to as well as to ourselves.

December 13

Stayed up late last night—and therefore slept in this morning—in order to watch, courtesy, as nearly always, of HBO, the television miniseries, *The Plot Against America*, based on the novel by Philip Roth I had read many years ago. I had then been captivated by the great what-if story: the election of the Germany-friendly Charles Lindbergh to the American presidency in 1940, beating Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The film-version did not disappoint me: the production values were superb, with the ambiance, above all the physical presence of early 1940's America captured with awesome fidelity; and the acting, too, was absolutely right-on. The ending is unconvincing but that doesn't matter. I could not help but suspect that the Trump Presidency provided the big motivation behind the making of this movie.

As I paged yesterday through the second volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* I came across, in chapter 37, the author's notorious account of the rise of monasticism. I had read it before, many years ago, but this time Gibbon' conspicuous biases and prejudices that were so much shaped by the so-called 'Age of Reason' in which he lived registered even more sharply on me. In one rather short sentence Gibbon does acknowledge the crucial role the medieval monasteries played, thanks to their indefatigable labours of manuscript copying, in the transmission of the many literary treasures of the Greco-Roman world to future generations, but, more than anything else, as he sees it, those monks of Late Antiquity, above all the solo-dwelling anchorites, not to mention the bizarre Simon Stylites, stand out as deluded half-mad fanatics: most certainly, they and the institutions they founded contributed mightily to the Decline and Fall.

December 14

The documentary on the Bee Gees I watched last night (thanks again to HBO) was a such a pleasant surprise and I learned so much from it. I had long known and admired them, and in the

video of tribute to Scott I put together, with Sylvia' indispensable expert help, ten years ago, had made their "How Deep Is Your Love" the musical accompaniment for the first set of photos in the opening part. But I had not known at all of their English-Australian background and the fact that they were three close-knit brothers, Barry, Maurice, and Robin. The documentary revealed in great detail and depth their immense creativity which, despite setbacks, ran freely for decades, as eventually they also began to compose songs for such stars as Barbra Streisand and Celine Dion and by the end had recorded a total of more than 1000 songs, I would say now that just as the Beatles defined the 60's with their undying legacy of music and song, so did the Bee Gees for the 70's.

When I learned of the death of Joh Le Carré at the age of 89 this morning my mind was cast back to a few of the many novels of his I have read since the 60's. Already his earlier works which bore the heavy imprint of the Cold War were compelling for their taut storylines, their well fleshed out characters and, above all, for their keen awareness of moral complexity. His post-Cold War novels added to these a bracing ambiance of cosmopolitanism. It is no exaggeration to regard him as the greatest British novelist of his life..

December 17

The three big fat volumes—comprising more than 3000 pages in all—of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* are still sitting in the living room where I do pretty well all my reading. At this point I seem to have got out of them all that I wanted. I read continuously---at times skimming, though—the first part up until what one might call the official termination of the West Roman Empire in the year 476, when the last emperor—a mini-prince only—named derisively Romulus Augustulus abdicated from his reign over the tiny sliver that was left of the once three-continents spanning empire and handed it over to the Germanic chieftain Odoacer who ruled over much of Italy. Past that date I have read very selectively.

The political history of the East Roman or Byzantine Empire seems to be mostly a grim story of man's crimes and follies. The emperor Justinian wasted the state's resources on the ultimately futile and ruinous wars in order to regain the lost territories in Italy and North Africa. Bloody internal strife, sometimes amounting to outright civil war and not seldom revolving around religious disputes weakened the Empire. The sense of morality and humanity of both the rulers and those who aspired to rule were often woefully lacking, and they were sometimes capable of hideous atrocities: witness the empress Irene who in the late 8th century wrested the imperial crown from her son, whom she arranged to have blinded for this purpose. The Empire lost much territory in the Near East in the 7th century in the irresistible onslaught of the Moslem-Arabic wave of conquest; Crusaders imposed their domination of half of a century over Constantinople and much of Greece after their sack of that great city in 1204; and the Greek rump state that remained was finally finished off in 1453 when, after fierce, desperate fighting, the Ottoman Turks under their sultan Mahomet II captured Constantinople; there would be no crusade from the Catholic West to recapture it.

The events of 1204 and 1453 are vividly described by Gibbon, and for this reason I will certainly be going back to other portions of his narrative. Gibbon, despite his, to us, dated albeit elegant 18th century prose style, is a superb story-teller, and provided one recognizes his biases and prejudices, his assessments and conclusions have much to commend them to any reader who wishes to understand how and why that "awful revolution"—to use Gibbon's words, although one should really speak of a concatenation of successive revolutions spanning, from the reign of Commodus onwards, almost 1300 years— of decline and fall came to pass.

December 19

This morning I received the email from Ingrid to all the brothers and sisters that Marvin had passed away peacefully earlier today. It was good to read of the faith in God's love of the two which has sustained them until the end. I could not help in my reply to Ingrid to recall how in my grief over Scott's tragic death almost 11 ½ years ago I was lifted up by my reawakened trust in God so that, as I put it, could "smile through my tears."

December 22

Have not done much reading over the past few days, except for past-paging it through St Augustine's *City of God* and reading some poems.in Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* in both the translation and the accompanying original German in the edition I used. For many years I have regarded Rilke as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century— he should have certainly won the Nobel Prize for literature. In my opinion, by far the best sonnets are those which, as it were, flawlessly meld the concrete and the abstract, and these I read very carefully and appreciatively. I was in fact emboldened to make an alternative translation of the second stanza of the final poem—one of the very best—of the collection, finding the existing translation too bland and prosaic.

I need to go back to the *City of God* before I venture to put my comments, both positive and negative, into writing.

Lots of viewing of movies and documentaries these past days. Parts of the lengthy HBO documentary on the Bee Gees merited reviewing; many of their songs, especially the ones dating from 1975 to 1979, when they were at the height of their well-deserved popularity, are unforgettably expressive and beautiful: "Be Tender With Your Love" and "How Deep Is Your Love" as they sung it continue to echo in my mind.

The CNN documentary on the 1918 pandemic added a great deal to my knowledge and actually helped me to understand the current one better: prior to this I had gone mainly with what I could find on the internet and in a 1999 book simply entitled *Flu*, which was focused more on the intensive research done afterwards on the aetiology of that horrendous plague, which was more deadly than Covid-19.

Just (1.10 pm) received and viewed a wonderfully fitting tribute to Marv: a video made and sent around to family and friends by Sylvia: it showed a long file of trucks (followed by a sedan and

pickup truck) from the two companies (cement making and garbage collection) where Marv worked as a transportation supervisor as they drove slowly past the home of Marv and Ingrid.

December 24

Christmas Eve: really looking forward to having Chris and Glenn over today and tomorrow and glad that Glenn will be staying for two overnights; maybe Chris will join him--three spare bedrooms is certainly handy although one is cluttered with books and movies. Making both a Christmas Eve and a Christmas Day dinner: ordering a pizza for tonight just didn't seem festive enough; hope Chris and Glenn will like my pasta dinner—a new recipe! I was sorry to hear from Peter that I may not be allowed to visit him next week because of my regular Sunday drives to Halifax with Chris—with the continuing extremely low daily rate of new infections also in the greater Halifax area this is caution stretched to an absurd extreme.

December 26

Good to see over the past two days churches meeting so well the challenges posed by the pandemic by embracing the digital media. Two days ago I was able to view and listen to niece Karen giving a fine Christmas focused sermon at the Maranatha Church in Nanaimo, where she is the assistant pastor. Then this morning I activated the link in Sylvia's email thanks to which I was enter into the Christmas celebrations of the Grace United Church in Sarnia. Such an outpouring of spirituality enlisting creativity: the music, the singing, the reading of the Grinch=Covid story enlivened with picturesque illustrations and directed, I imagine, not only to the congregation's children but indeed to all the young at heart, and finally the "baking" and the "cookies and coco sermonettes."

December 27

Watched a new movie last night, *I still believe*—courtesy, as usual, of HBO—that was obviously a production of the so-called evangelical Christian culture south of the border. I was tempted in its first 20-30 minutes to dismiss it as little more than a Christianized remake of *Love Story*, the big movie hit of 1970 starring Ali McGraw and Ryan McNeil, but as the story progressed I was deeply touched by it: here was eros transcended into *agapé,* self-giving love, man-woman very heterosexual of course, but it carried universality. I hope in the (perhaps still distant) future that same culture will come up with a film production that celebrates the possibility of same-sex eros reaching the same heights of *agapé*. That is what you see in the memorable 2015 movie, *The Normal Heart*, which takes you into the midst of the AIDS crisis as it began to ravage New York in the early 1980s.

December 31

I'll end the year with a bold flight of the imagination which I expressed two days ago in an email to my friend and fellow classicist Jim Jope in which I was commenting on his review of a recent collection of papers devoted to the great Roman poet-philosopher Lucretius. I had always been puzzled by Lucretius' conception of the gods which he had inherited from Epicurus.

Lucretius and the founder of the Epicurean philosophy had portrayed the gods as being totally different from the traditional Greek and Roman gods: according to them, the gods lived far remote from humankind on the periphery of the universe; their bodies were composed of superfine atoms very different from those which made up the human body and their minds were ruled by an acme of joy and tranquillity; they did not at all interfere with the comings and goings of mankind, but since humans had glimpses of the gods in their dreams, these could inspire them to live similarly blessed lives free from all the ills of the mind, above all the fear of death, human beings are prone to.

As I wrote to Jim, I had begun to conceive the gods according to the Epicurean and Lucretian model as aliens from a galactically distant planet and from an infinitely more advanced civilization: beings of pure, benevolent intelligence living in joy and tranquillity, liking to observe the comings and goings of humans but choosing not in any way to intervene. They did, however, impinge on men's and women's dreams where the dreamers might take in images of their radiant blessedness and be inspired by them. Here my imagination had been fired by Michio Kaku, the well-known theoretical physicist whose 2018 book, *The Future of Humanity*, I read recently and then discussed in my journal last month, He envisions humankind as continuing to evolve while being propelled by almost incredible achievements in science and technology, thus eventually becoming beings of disembodied pure intelligence able to traverse the universe at a faster-than-light speed. What a fascinating trajectory ever onward and upward for humankind, becoming over countless aeons like unto these almost supernatural aliens, veritable gods indeed as Epicurus and Lucretius imagined them.

January 1, 2021

A beautiful day to start the new year: brilliant sunshine, just below freezing point temperatures, and no wind; I treated myself, therefore, to a walk of 1 ½ hours plus a stop at MacDonald's for my daily coffee.

This morning watched most of a documentary, "My Generation," narrated by Michael Caine, who himself as a young adult in his 30's lived through the cultural revolution of the 1960's, making his own unique contribution to it as a movie actor. Caine took in all the familiar markings of that decade: the Vietnam War, pop music, student protests, the so-called sexual revolution, the hippies, fashions including for the first time in more than a century long hair for men, drugs etc. Caine's narrative was of course focused on the British scene, nearly all of which pretty well also covered the U.S.A. For the Canadian scene of that decade I must add: separatism in Quebec sometimes turning to violence—which was to reach its climax in the 1970 October Crisis—Pierre Eliott Trudeau, and the Centennial of Confederation, and the decriminalization of homosexuality, the last three of which of which really underlined the great sense of optimism which prevailed at that time in Canada.

For myself, though, the decade of revolutionary change was the following one, starting in the spring and summer of 1970 with my coming out as a gay man and meeting Brian, getting involved later that year with the nascent gay and lesbian movement in Toronto, meeting Scott in Vancouver five years later, and finding my circuitous way towards an academic career, which ended in 1978 with my tenure track appointment at Acadia University.

January 2,

It is high time that I register my response to St Augustin's *City of God*. In my entry of almost two weeks ago, I said my response would be both positive and negative, and so it is, but for me, personally, the negative outweighs the positive. But I'll start with the positive. I was happy to see that A. in no way whatsoever, not even in part, identifies the City of God with the Christianized and still Christianizing Roman Empire, neither with its Western half which had become little more than a rump state at the time he was writing his *opus magnum* nor with its Eastern half, known to us the Byzantine Empire, which was still imposing and prosperous and fated to last for more than a 1000 years. It is strange, though, that he hardly draws upon Jesus's preaching of the Kingdom of God as we encounter it in the three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' Kingdom of God, the bedrock of his teaching, is really down-to-earth, its charter for living as citizens of that Kingdom laid out, so to speak, in his Beatitudes, whereas A.'s City of God is mystical and still lying mostly hidden in the future.

On a satirical-humorous note, A., as he draws on the scholarship of the polymath Varro--whose works are mostly lost now, making A's referencing here of the great Roman scholar all the more valuable to modern scholarship—has obviously a great deal of fun drawing out the—for us, too—*reductio ad absurdum*—of Roman polytheism with its innumerable gods and godlets, many of the latter presiding over the lowliest facets of the human condition.

In my earlier entry, I already spoke of A.'s misunderstanding and therefore reprobation in his *Confessions* of human sexuality. The *City of God is* also full of these, but now there is much more emotional detachment as befits his now meta-historical and philosophical perspective. Sexual intercourse is only for the God-mandated purpose of procreation. Since all of Adam and Eve's children were begotten and born after their parents' expulsion from Paradise, the sexual intercourse of the two progenitors of the human race was inevitably tainted by concupiscence, i.e. lust. For a moment, A, tries to imagine what kind of free-from-lust physical intimacy Adam and Eve would have had to enter upon in Paradise strictly for the purpose of producing children—however, modesty forbids him to pursue this any further. I must say I see a kind of unintentional humour in all of this: A. was trying to imagine the for him, too, unimaginable.

The most deplorable part of the *City of God* is its justification of the doctrine of eternal damnation for nonbelievers and unrepentant sinners. The sophistry with which A. ventures to defend this monstrosity is, to say the last, perverse. This doctrine has done Christianity immeasurable harm. It is clear to me, again on the basis of the Synoptic Gospels, that what Jesus teaches is purgatory, not condemnation to an everlasting hell and a forever deprivation of the Grace of God.

January 4

Glenn gave me as one of Christmas presents the novel *1956* by Stephen Marlowe published in 1981. I finished it a few days ago and I would unhesitatingly place it in the same league as John Le Carré's best fiction. Its superb story telling skillfully combines two initially quite separate trains of events and developments, one leading to the tragically failed Hungarian uprising against Soviet communist domination and the other to the short Israeli-British-French-Egyptian war mainly fought along the banks of the Suez Canal, with both climactic happenings taking place

concurrently from late October to early November of 1956. The growing intimate relationship between the two central characters, Brenton Southard, a senior CIA intelligence officer active in Hungary and East and West Germany and young Deborah Brodsky working as a double agent for Israeli intelligence in Egypt and the West Bank unfolds as they cross paths in their ultra-dangerous missions . There are many other memorable characters on each side of the overall storyline. An extra and unusual bonus of 1956 is that it brings forward in person and engaged in—of course fictionalized— dialogue real-life historical characters such as Allen Dulles, Eisenhower, and Khrushchev; to the best of my recollection, Le Carré never takes such liberties.

January 7

Having spent nearly all of the past few years on other literature in my systematic reading projects, I am going back to Canadian novels; these I have hardly touched during this period. I actually came late to novels by Canadian authors. They were not included in my high school English classes and also did not appear in my undergraduate English courses: it was all novels by 18th to 20th (century (works up until the 1930's) British authors plus the Irish James Joyce with a few American authors thrown in as well. The only Canadian novel I recall reading well before the late 70's was Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*; others by the same writer were to follow much later. My ongoing interest in Canadian novels began only with my move to Nova Scotia in 1978. Somehow the security offered me by my tenure-track position at Acadia plus what I would not hesitate to characterize as the far less Americanized social and cultural environment in which I now found myself pushed me in this direction. I started with Margaret Atwood's early novels and not much later I also discovered Margaret Laurence and Timothy Findley, and I continued to follow these while also, along the way, discovering other, mostly newly emerging writers. The pace of discovery has slowed considerably over the past decade, but I want to get back into the spirit of this marvelous journey. In the meantime, I will concentrate on rereading many of the great novels which I read already decades ago, and it will be almost like reading them for the first time. Thus far it's been Findley's *The Wars* and I have nearly finished his *Famous Last Words*, and I'll continue with Findley for some time to come. My fresh new reading of these two novels already confirms my long-standing opinion that the Canadian novel over the past half century has risen to the stature of world literature.

January 11

As I started reading Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* and continued reading for a while, I was not impressed; the story and the characters that appeared in it were, for the most part, too phantasmagoric even bizarre, but as I continued I grew to like it and to admire the she audacity and brilliance of the author's imagination which utterly transforms the stern O.T, story of the Great Deluge and of Noah and his family as the human race's sole survivors, thanks to the great Ark, of God's wrath. Real character types emerge in the course of the tale: Noah and his wife Mrs Noyes right from the beginning, others soon thereafter, such as God (Jaweh), the couple's sons and their wives, and an array of thinking and talking animals, above all Mrs Noyes's cat Mollyt. After they board the Ark to spend months cooped up in there the sheer revelatory interactional (human-human, animal-animal, animal-human drama of it all rises to the highest possible pitch. Some may find Findley's retelling of this grandiose biblical story blasphemous—I am thinking here above all of the portrayal of Jaweh as a slovenly, almost dilapidated feudal lord whose power is in obvious decline but who is still able and prepared to inflict upon sinful

humanity the final and most terrible outpouring of his wrath—but for me the effect is cathartic intellectually and emotionally as it does away, for me at least, with an untenable theologizing about the nature of God.

January 15, 2021

Some years ago I was pleasantly surprised when I was contacted by regular mail by a former student of mine, Kyle, who in the 2000's had taken two courses of mine, Introduction to Roman Civilization and First-Year Latin. He had remained in my memory as an exceptional young man, highly intelligent and a damn-good writer. Ever since our re-established communication we have remained in touch. I have had the pleasure of meeting him three times in Toronto and once in Calgary (in both places he has family). After Acadia he went on to a do a law degree and was called to the bar in Ontario and subsequently got a Master's in Law at the University of London, England, and has been teaching law at a community college in Calgary. There he has only a contract position, often part-time, so I have been after him to get a PhD, which is absolutely required now for a tenure-track position at a university, where I am confident he would have a brilliant academic career. Kyle is a model millennial, internet and all-round media-savvy, well informed and most articulate about a wide range of issues, an indefatigable long-distance cyclist, a devoted conservationist and nurturer and planter of seedlings, an enthusiastic authority on animes (hitherto a complete terra incognita in pop culture to me), passionate about social justice, and last but not least, an accomplished photographer—I have an album with a magnificent collection of the many scenic photos shot by him in his travels around the world. Over the past week we have been exchanging by email our views on some of the weightiest questions that come up incessantly for us in our respective philosophies of life: above all, immortality, the nature of God, and the nature of the universe, It is an exchange of ideas whereby we learn from each other as between two equals, not an attempt to convert. I have told Kyle that I am wishing now my typing was better and faster: his epistles are invariably lengthy; in mine I have to strive for the utmost in brevity and concision because after an hour or so I am too tired to continue typing—typing this entry in my journal has cost me over an hour.

January 16

Just finished Findley's *Headhunter.* A fascinating story in set in a very dark, surreal but still quite recognizable contemporary (the early 90's) Toronto, a city despoiled by misgovernment, anomie, and moral depravity. Findley is breathtakingly ingenious in weaving his story. In the final analysis, it becomes also uplifting in that the two female characters, Lilah and Amy, both afflicted with schizophrenia, societal rejects, so to speak, are transformed into the moral grounding of the story.

January 21

Just finished reading *The Piano Man's Daughter*, a masterpiece of a very different kind than the novels by Findley I had read previously. It is a story, set in rural southern Ontario and in Toronto and spanning more than half a century, of two families brought together through wedlock and marriage. The central characters are Lily, epileptic and schizophrenic from early childhood onwards, and her only child, Tom, who is the narrator, deeply attached to his mother all her life. As the story progresses Lily, despite her severe physical and mental handicaps and

her eventual tragic death, becomes an increasingly luminous, almost mythical figure in Tom's life (she is finally associated in his mind with the Greek nature god, Pan). This is indeed "a hauntingly beautiful" story, as one critic has it, and I would add, most certainly tragic—I readily compare it to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of d'Urbervilles*—but at the end the tragedy is sublimated in the birth of Tom's daughter Emma, his mother's luminous parting gift, as it were, to him.

January 23

Last night I took from one of my bookshelves' Hans Küng's *Does God Exist: An Answer for Today* in order to get his thoughts on two of the 20th century's most prominent philosophers, Alfred North Whitehead and Karl Popper, and I was not disappointed: meticulous scholarship, ample quotations from the works of these two, and incisive critiques. I discovered K. about four decades ago, reading his the great triad in which *On Being a Christian* came first in publication and *Eternal Life?* third and read later many of his other works, among which his epochal contributions to interfaith dialogue especially stand out. To me he is a giant of 20th and 21th century theology who had a decisive influence on my spiritual and intellectual growth; for this I'll always be mightily grateful to him.

January 26

Finished reading yesterday Findley's *Pilgrim*. This is most definitely his greatest novel; it should be regarded as a classic not only of Canadian but also world literature. I put it at a par with Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Interestingly, both novels are set mainly in Switzerland in the early 20th century and come to an end at the beginning of WWI: Most of *Pilgrim* is set at a psychiatric institution in Zurich and Mann's novel at a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. Like *The Magic Mountain*, Findley's novel delves into fundamental questions facing individual men and women, society as a whole, and even an entire civilization, and does so, I think, even more trenchantly than Mann. Its central character, simply named Pilgrim, suicidal, probably to some degree schizophrenic, veers between idealism and nihilism, with his radical questioning of the values most of us take for granted. His visionary powers propel him into the lives of Leonardo de Vinci and the girl, later a married woman, closest to him and best known to later generations the Mona Lisa, also into the last years of Oscar Wilde—more briefly this time and helped along by recollection--and finally into the life of the young woman who is now venerated as Saint Teresa of Avila. He becomes the patient of Carl Gustav Jung, one of Freud's early acolytes who broke away from the Master. In the course of the story he fashions his famous theory of the collective unconscious, a construct which, I'd say, encapsulates much of the primal tumult which continually rears its head in Pilgrim's mind. Although destined to become an acclaimed psychoanalyst and sage of the human condition he is also a sort of tragic figure: he fails with Pilgrim, destroys his marriage because of his unfaithfulness to his wife, and at the end he is plagued with the most frightful of nightmares prefiguring the horrors of WWI.

The two other major characters are both women, Emma, Carl's wife, and the aristocratic Sibyl Quartermaine. They are both truly grounded in the best sense in their respective lives. Sibyl is a faithful friend to Pilgrim until the very end when she dies in an accident. Emma is a good mother, and a loyal, steadfast partner to Carl, even assisting him in some of his research, and despite his infidelity does not walk away from a marriage which he has, on his side, de facto

destroyed. These two women strike me as the kind of person that holds a society and a civilization together.

Stylistically, too, *Pilgrim* is a brilliant tour de force, with its powers of crisp narrative, vivid description, and pointed dialogue, both interpersonal and intrapersonal—in the latter the person speaking, as it were, silently to him/herself and thus engaged in what is called interior monologue. *Pilgrim* demands a close reading; skimming through it won't do.

January 28

It is shocking that the thousands of deaths of seniors in long term care facilities during the early months of the pandemic did not galvanize the authorities to take the necessary steps to prevent these tragedies from happening again now in the so-called second wav of the Covid-19 virus despite all the pious promises made then. Only in the provinces of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador have such measures been put into place and thus many lives have been spared. Over 200 doctors and other health care specialists have written an open letter to the Ontario government demanding immediate and drastic action including calling in the military; long-range action must start with abolishing all privately owned nursing homes as for profit institutions and putting them directly under public health authority. In comparison with many countries Canada is handling the pandemic crisis fairly well, but our country's record could and should be even better. Finally, there are reports of such neglect at some nursing homes (to use the older and more frankly worded designation) that residents are left unfed and dehydrated, this surely hastening their physical decline and even death; here prosecution of the owners for manslaughter though neglect would be in order.

January 30

Finished two days ago *Spadework*, the last Findley novel on my reading list and the last written by him. Set as it is in Stratford, Ontario, mainly in the summer of 1998, it is by far the most contemporary of the seven novels by him I have read. Nearly of the novel's characters live lives caught up in the hurly burly of the annual Stratford Theatre Festival, including the thirtyish married couple, Jane, prop artist and her husband and up and coming actor Griff (Griffin); on these two and the fate of their threatened marriage pivots the story. *Spadework* amply demonstrates Findley's intimate knowledge of the Festival and the town of Stratford, and this gives the story a special liveliness. I'd say that this is by far the least tragic of Findley's novels I have read. It certainly has tragic elements but on the whole it reads like a comedy, a comedy of manners and shifting relationships, in which a gay relationship, albeit a temporary one, plays a crucial role. *Spadework*, with its crisp narrative, vivid, even mood-setting description, its pointed dialogues and likewise interior monologues and, last but not least, its humour spilling over at times into patent satire, made a memorable closure of Findley's novels for me.

February 1

Just over a year ago I finished my systematic reading project lasting almost three years that took me into 19th and 20th century novels—a few just outside this chronological framework--almost exclusively written by British, French, and German authors which I had not read before. It was an immensely satisfying experience, and for this reason I am sorry I did not start my journal

much earlier as this would have allowed me to create an ongoing commentary on what I was reading. Starting with Timothy Findley almost three weeks ago, I am now circling back even more to English-language Canadian novels. Much of this will be rereading works I already read many years, even decades ago, but I already in my just completed reading of Findley I realized that reading a novel—or for that matter any work of literature—for the second time after so many years is almost like reading it for the first time. I am once more seeing this now in my reading of Hugh MacLennan's first novel, *Barometer Rising*, which I first read way back in the 70's .(I had read his second published novel, *Two Solitudes*, even earlier, and this will be second on my present reading list in which I expect to read seven of his novels.) Eventually, I may do the same with American as well as English-language novels from other countries

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February 5

I am in the midst of Hugh MacLennan's novels, having just started on *The Precipice*, which, unlike *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes*, I'd never read before. The first two novels are all about Canada from the narrator 's late 1930's to mid-40's perspective and magnificently so. As I can already see, MacLennan's third novel published in 1948 brings the United States heavily into focus, and this explains the appearance on the covers of snippets of positive reviews in American newspapers . In the meantime Chris has taken out for me from the Acadia Library a copy of an English translation of Robert Musil's *Die Mann Ohne Eigenschaften* (The Mann Without Qualities). I have dipped a little into it but so far I am not impressed: maybe it is modernist masterpieces—although almost completely unread, unlike Joyce's *Ulysses*—but it does not have at all the qualities I expect from a good novel, whether traditional or modernist, namely an emotive and sensuous narrative replete with pointed dialogue and vividly rendered interior dialogue, for in its conception and execution thereof it is almost completely intellectual.. However, I will continue to read more and perhaps I'll change my mind.

February 7

Have continued a bit with Musil's strange novel but this has not changed my mind. I'm still just dipping into it, though, rather than reading consecutively. Am continuing with MacLennan and have begun *Each Man's Son*, his fourth. Off again with Chris to Halifax and Bedford this Sunday; it has become such an enjoyable break in my weekly routine. What looks like it might become the biggest snowstorm of this winter will strike tonight, but we should be back home in time.

February 8

Biggest snow fall, more than 40 cm, last night and early this morning I have seen since 2015 when all time records were set. Chris, who had stayed overnight, had to dig out his car this morning and when he finally succeeded in backing up into the street, the latter had not been sufficiently cleared as yet and so he had to back up again into the driveway and is back at my place; as of now—it is past 3 pm—the big snow plough still has to come by before he can drive to his apartment home. Dan, who always clears my driveway and the path leading to the front door, has come by, so these are OK. I doubt whether the sidewalk will be cleared very soon, but this wouldn't really matter for the time being since I don't mind walking on the main pavement

unless there is a lot of traffic. I hope that by tonight or early this morning, everything will be a little back to normal.

5.30 pm: Chris was finally able to leave for home: the main pavement was enough cleared of snow and the sidewalk had been cleared too. Tomorrow there should be no problem in going out and doing whatever errands I need to do in downtown New Minas.

February 12

Have watched via DVD four Inspector Maigret films over the past several days. They are based on the well known Inspector Maigret novels by Georges Simenon. The movies are BBC productions and therefore, not surprisingly, superbly done: great acting, with Rowan Atkinson—best known up till now as Mr Bean—in the lead as well as a well crafted recreation of what Paris and France were like in the 1950's. Atknson's acting beautifully brings out Maigret's high intelligence and humanity and his remarkable skill in profiling criminals well before they are identified and arrested; his wonderful relationship with his wife, very much a partnership of equals, is a pleasure to watch To be quite honest, decades ago I read a few of the novels—that was in the 60's when, for a while, I also had an Agatha Christie fix—but I believe that because of the frequent complexity of the plot lines one can relish them better when one moves more slowly through the novels; even so, I thoroughly enjoyed the movies.

Have read by now five of Hugh MacLennan's novels and should read the remaining two within the next week or so. Have already the highest praise, on which I look forward to elaborate when I have finished his final novel, *Voices in Time*.

February 13

A short news blurb yesterday at the bottom of the CBC News. One had only one second to take it in, and, as far as I could see, it was not followed up by commentary and further details in the regular newscast: The UN fears that two million children will starve to death in Yemen this year. That wretched country has been torn apart for years now by a civil war in which probably already many tens of thousands of civilians, most notably children, have died because of war injuries, disease, and famine. This brutal civil war is only a proxy for an unabashedly murderous conflict between Iran one side and Saudi Arabia and its allies on the other. The most prominent ally of the Saudis is the US, which is making billions every year selling military hardware to the former, and Canada too is guilty of such complicity. You don't hear too much of Canada's role these days, much, sometimes even most, of the news in our country being taken up by the pandemic. So far just over 21000 people have died of Covid-19 since last March; a few thousand will probably have been added to that number when the pandemic has come to an end. I put that number over against the number of Yemeni children who may die this year of famine and malnutrition, even if the number of the UN estimate is wildly inflated—maybe 'just' a tenth of that number, 200.000, but this still gives me much to think about, above of our country's and indeed of the whole world's priorities.

February 16

After a week of real winter---heavy snow followed by a spell of bitter cold--we may be going back to the kind of variable weather we had in December and January, temperatures around or even above average and moderate snow falls followed by rain. Today it is ice pellets, fortunately not freezing rain, which makes for far more slippery pavements than the former. One inevitably tends to watch the Weather Channel a lot more often in the winter months. It has occurred to me many times already how much this Channel has been transformed over the past few decades, no longer simply a purveyor of information but also of an unmistakable dose of what I do not hesitate to call entertainment such as offered under the rubric of "Force of Nature," and, as one might expect, chock full of commercials. Yesterday and today, it was and still is the weather in Texas, which has been buffeted by a fierce winter storm completely unheard of in s state most of which is virtually subtropical: heavy blowing snow, perilous driving conditions, and millions without power. Do I detect a bit of *Schadenfreude* in the Channel's coverage of this weather event: macho, right-wing, and Trumpian Texas pummelled like this by Mother Nature?

February 17

I take back what I said about *Schadenfreude.* The situation in Texas is too horrendous to make a joke about I find the explanation of the cause, put forward by progressive American news channels, of the massive power outages there very credible: nearly all of Texas is not integrated into the power grid of the western U.S (which parallels that of the eastern half); the Lone Star State had to go it alone with its own power grid, one that has been inadequately maintained over the years by the penny-pinching Republicans who still run the state and want to keep electricity rates as low as possible; the squawking done by Fox News about the supposedly now frozen wind turbines—these being the indulgence of the clean energy elites—voices a pathetic lie, which, unfortunately, will find credence among the climate change deniers of the extreme right.

February 19

Finished all of Hugh MacLellan's novels a few days ago. *With Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes*, it was a reading for the second time but my first reading of them took place decades ago; even so, my going back gave me an enormous amount of fresh pleasure. I also dipped into an anthology of his writings, both fiction and no-fiction, and was delighted with some of his essays and the excerpts from his splendid book on the great rivers of Canada. MacLellan's novels deserve all the accolades bestowed on them by readers and critics since 1941 when his first novel was published. His novels has all the essential qualities—noted in an earlier entry—that make them shine as a exceptionally fine works of literature He has been called Canada's first truly postcolonial novelist, for most of novels his novels are imbued with themes and concerns that are distinctly Canadian, above all with the lofty issues of Canadian identity that have beset our country since the Second World War when Canada began to make its fateful turn, politically, economically, and culturally, away from Britain to wards its southern neighbour. MacLellan's last novel, *Voices in Time*, published in 1980, marks a bold departure for the author, taking the reader into both the dystopian future of a world ravaged by nuclear war and the grim past of a Nazi Germany in WWII. MacLellan has strikingly written himself into the novel's central character Conrad Dehlem, who spans both worlds; like the author, he is by virtue of his academic training a classicist and historian, the subject of whose major scholarly publication—the story of the socio-economic decline and demise of an Egyptian community in the Roman Empire—being identical to that of MacLellan's doctoral dissertation at Princeton in the 1930's;

On a critical note: McLellan's second last published novel, *The Return of the Sphinx*, has, in my opinion, a serious weakness in the way it is attuned to the social and political situation in Quebec in the 1960's, and indeed in Canada as whole, right up until the October 1970 crisis.. The novel was published in 1967, so I have to assume that the author was working on it during much of the early and mid-1960's (his previous novel, *The Watch That Ends The Night*, was published in 1958), but while it draws the reader into the turmoil created both in society and family by the separatist movement, it largely ignores the forceful and far-reaching impact made on Québecois society by the so-called, Quiet Revolution, which began to make itself felt soon after the Liberal government of Jean Lesage took power in 1960. Just as seriously, the workings, in concert with the leading personages, of the federal government are so heavily fictionalized that they lack the ring of authenticity

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January 23

TCM has really been treating me since last night with total of five great movies. Last night it was *Rain Man* (1988), which Dustin Hoffman won a well deserved best actor Oscar award for his portrayal of a middle-aged seriously autistic middle-aged man although one blessed with phenomenal *savant* capacities. This was the second time I watched the movie and now I concentrated on Tom Cruise's performance as the younger brother of his autistic older brother, an outstanding performance—moving from being arrogant and impatient at the beginning to finally becoming a connecting and loving brother-- for which I think he deserved an Oscar inn a supporting role.

And today it is four movies starring one of my favourite actors, in my opinion one of the greatest British actors of the past century, Dirk Bogarde. I have seen three of these movies before, including the history-making *Victim* of 1961, but great acting of course is something you want to watch over and over again. *Libel* (1960) I had never seen before and with its lengthy and gripping court scene, its telling flashbacks, and its stunning denouement it will always remain most memorable and alive with me. *Death in Venice* comes on this evening. I have seen it more than once before, the first time in Toronto decades ago, shortly after it come out in 1971, I remember it as a remarkably faithful adaptation of Thomas Mann's novella, with superb onsite production values and with Bogarde giving a stellar performance. I did find it, though, somewhat overlong at the beginning; I wonder what I will think a few hours from now.

9 pm. I take back what I said about the movie's being overlong. The story of *Death of Venice* simply had to unfold slowly and inexorably, and thus perfectly. Since my first viewing in a Toronto cinema almost 50 years ago, I had watched the movie only on small screen television, where, as I can see clearly now, no justice could be done to this truly magnificent adaptation of Mann's novella. But now that I have finally watched it on my large screen television, the movie is fully and indelibly fixed in my memory. Everything is right about it: the sumptuous indoor and outdoor settings, Bogarde's indeed stellar acting, most of it done in silence and through facial expression, the telling use of Gustave Aschenbach's flashbacks where we learn he is a composer rather than a writer as in the novella, and the excerpts from Mahler's mood-stirring Second and Fifth Symphonies at the beginning and the end . The fact that as the story moves into its second, tragic half, the ominous signs of a cholera outbreak---part of a pandemic starting in India, as the story has it—appear everywhere gave the story for me an almost weird topicality.

February 25

In the exchange of email letters between Kyle and myself the question of free will came up, with Kyle cited the opinion of Elon Musk that we humans are basically automatons, I responded to this and to the whole question of free will in a letter to him a few days ago, suggesting that the question should not be framed in the rather nebulous idea of free will but that, instead, I prefer to speak of the capacity for autonomous, i.e. self-initiated agency, and the degrees to which such agency comes into play, with this depending on the complexity of the life-form we are looking at. Thus in a one-cell micro-organism the capacity is minimal, virtually non-existent, but as we go up the ascending scale of complexity in life-forms with Homo sapiens sapiens at the top--making allowance, of course, for the possibility that we may in the future discover even more complex living beings elsewhere in the universe—we find that human beings have indeed the maximum, although still limited capacity for autonomous agency; in the newly born it is, not surprisingly, very circumscribed but even in healthy adults is far from omnipotent.

I concluded my letter by saying that mine is an intermediary position that occupies the middle: we are certainly not automatons but neither is our capacity for free will—or as I would have, it, our capacity for autonomous agency –absolute and unrestrained. I am curious what Kyle's response will be.

March 1

Just over a week ago I started on a miscellany of nine Canadian novels plus a collection of short stories. A few of them I have never read before and are by authors I have never read before; others I have not read before but are by authors whom I have read before; and finally, one is a novel, a great Canadian classic, I have read before but which I thought deserved a fresh reading.

I have read three of these by now, starting with Thomas Randall's *His Majesty's Yankees*, published in 1942, I was somewhat familiar with the name of this Nova Scotian author but had never read any of his novels. This one of the most engaging historical novels I have read, telling the story of a little known period in the history of Nova Scotia and Canada that was completely unknown to me, and had the story ended differently, Nova Scotia would have become the 14th British colony in North America which revolted successfully against British rule and, together with the entire Maritime region, would have then formed a state of the newly independent and sovereign United States of America. One can only imagine how this would have impacted on what would have remained of British North America, I have checked online on line to make sure the novel had he essential facts of the story right and have not been disappointed, The story is told with remarkable authenticity by a fictional character, David Strang, who as a young man participated for a while in the rebellion. If I were teaching a course on the history of Nova Scotia and Canada this novel, work of fiction though it is, would rank high on the reading list of my students.

The Mountain and the Valley by Ernest Buckler, published in 1951, which I read for the first time decades ago, more than deserved a second reading My first reading was partially motivated by the fact that the story is set in the Annapolis Valley over a period of two decades from the 20's to the 40's, but I soon came to appreciate it as a psychological novel of the highest order, probably unique in Canadian literature and one that I would not hesitate to rank alongside Virginia Woolf's

The Waves. I again read it in the edition which has the superb introduction by Claude Bissell. What I concentrated on this were the author's extraordinary linguistic powers, which would pose a tough challenge to any translator. I am thinking here especially of his unique penchant for compounding words—nouns, adjectives, and verbs—so as to create neologisms of remarkable sensory and perceptual powers.

I have just finished Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), a novel written especially for young people which I, too, found deeply satisfying. It tells the story of two adolescent young men and close friends, a Cree and a white, and their long trek, which turns into an ordeal of wintry survival, through northlands of Manitoba. This is the first work by this well known author I have ever read; more are sure to follow.

March 4

Sara Jeannette Duncan, *The Imperialist*, published in 1904; This is almost certainly the earliest written and published Canadian novel I will ever read. The introduction by Claude Bissell has it that this is the first realistic Canadian novel, and having just finished reading it, I agree that it is indeed a novel of realism and not a romance. It is striking that this is only the only one of Duncan's novels that is set in contemporary Canada as the author married an Englishman in her thirties and lived the rest of her life away from her native land. Set in the fictional southern Ontario town of Elgin in the early 20th century, the story, quite remarkably for a female author of that period, goes deep into the world of politics; the only parallel I can think of is George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* written a few decades earlier. Religion as embodied in the institution of the Presbyterian Church in Elgin also carries a lot of weight. The novel comes with a lot of memorable major and minor characters and two well developed stories of romance and courting, but for me it stands out for the all-enveloping substance of the 'omniscient' third-person narrator's observations and comments into which the author has poured all her writing craft and powers of intellect. The narrator's prose is often ponderous, in a not altogether surprisingly Victorian manner, but it is often leavened by humour and irony, so that while at the beginning I was wondering I could derive much pleasure from the novel, this unfavourable impression soon started to swing the other way.

March 6

Had to reboot this afternoon but it took an awfully long time. Will ask Chris about it. Also remembered that I kept handwritten journals for more than three decades. These are spread over three lots: two kept in separate file folders, for the third lot I used a softcover book with blank pages. I made these entries for the purpose of recording personal feelings and reflections, no book and movie reviews or comments on society and the world of politics. For almost seven years, from Oct. 2012 to August 2019, I recorded in the softcover book my dreams in which Scott appeared, to the best of my ability to reconstruct them. A good number of them, perhaps in fact (I haven't made an exact count) the large majority of them, are very positive and affirming—what a blessing this is for me. The last entry I made for the dreams I recorded, namely August 23, 2019, is also the final entry for my handwritten journals. My start on this online journal on January 13, 2020, was therefore a timely one. Not surprisingly, going quickly though through all these handwritten pages was a deeply emotional experience for me, bringing at times, even now, tears to my eyes.

I also reminded myself this afternoon that the two drawers on the left side of the desk in my office are full of personal mementos, mostly pertaining to Scott and myself, such as official documents and letters, personal letters, newspaper clippings, photos, even audio-tapes prepared by Scott decades ago.. In addition, my office has two bags with the many letters, handwritten or typed and often very lengthy, written to me by Scott after we split up in January 1995 up till 2009, the year of his death.

March 9

The Temptations of Big Bear, published in 1973, is the first novel by Rudy Wiebe I have read and I've found it so impressive that I must also get hold of and read in his first and also highly acclaimed work, *Peace Shall Destroy Many.* The 1973 novel unfolds, in brilliant, vivid writing, based on the author's meticulous research and centred on Big Bear, a leading chief among the Canadian Plains 'Indians,' the tragedy of how the indigenous peoples of Canada's vast Prairie lands were overwhelmed by the unstoppable surge westwards of the white man, with government functionaries, the military, and the RCMP doing the ground work, and thus saw their traditional way of life utterly destroyed. The story is alive with many major and minor characters, indigenous, of mixed race, and white, and shifts from place to place, so much so at times it became for me a challenge to keep it on track in my reading. The author uses at times in his narrative the modernist stream of consciousness technique, paragraph after paragraph unpunctuated prose. I had to read these in only in a generalizing impressionistic way; otherwise, I would have become mired in the succession of details piled on top of each other. For me, the technique has been used with complete success, at least for myself in my reading, only once, in the final part, given over to Molly Bloom, of James Joyce's *Ulysses.* Despite this criticism, however, this novel amply deserved The Governor-General's Award of 1973.

I am just finishing Mordecai Richler's *Joshua Now and Then*, published in 1980. I had already read two of his earlier novels, albeit a long time ago, so I was somewhat prepared for this novel. I cannot honestly say I like it, despite the critical acclaims recorded on the back cover of the paperback that is in my collection: as I see it, we have here humour-edged realism morphing too often into a too obvious (and now dated) irony and satire interspersed with jarring dollops of dark humour such as the imagined crematoria of Auschwitz with Sonny and Cher singing "The Way We Were"; of course, only a Jewish writer could away with this—at least Barbra Streisand is not named as singing the song. Fortunately, the story of the hideous persecutions of the Jews by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition is told straight. After reading the first few pages fairly carefully, I read the rest only perfunctorily in less than two hours.

Next come three novels and a collection of short stories by Margaret Laurence. The latter and *The Stone Angel*, probably her most highly acclaimed novel, I already read a long time ago; it will be a pleasure to go back to them and then to discover the other two novels, *The Diviners* and the *Fire-Dwellers*.

March 11

Two days ago I came across in my library John Moss's *Patterns of Isolation*, a superb study of the Canadian novel until the late 60's. I had glanced through it when I bought it decades ago but since I had read at that time only a very limited number of novels that came within the book's

time-span I did not give it the thorough reading it deserved. As a profoundly deep-going study it is, I think, superior to Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, published in 1972—two years earlier than Moss's book—which I already read in the 70's, although *Survival* does have the advantage of also looking at French Canadian literature. Now I have really benefitted from Moss's profound insights into the core meanings of such novels as *The Imperialist*, *As for Me and My hou*se (which I must reread soon), *The Mountain and the Valley*, and *The Stone Angel*, even if do not always fully agree with him as on, for example, the ending of Buckler's novel: Moss sees David Canaan's death on the "Mountain," alone in the midst of a snow storm as tragic, but for me, and the narrative here is abundantly clear on this, David's final moments of consciousness are irradiated with an epiphany in which he finally he finally grasps the exalted meaningfulness of his life which his highly intelligent and sensitive self has been searching for from childhood onwards.

March 14

After what I said in a previous entry, I have given more thought to the stream of consciousness technique. I still maintain that too often the technique makes excessive and therefore quite unrewarding demands upon the reader. That is even true of Joyce's *Ulysses*, with the grand exception of Molly Bloom's interior monologue with which the novel concludes—dozens of pages unpunctuated prose which magnificently meld together so that we are flawlessly immersed in her inner thoughts and feelings as she moves towards falling asleep. Elsewhere, though, Joyce uses successions of very short, clipped sentences in order to render a character's inner life, but all this achieves is a staccato effect in response to which the reader soon gets mired and stuck. I single out William Faulkner as a novelist who does use the technique with some success—I am thinking of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*—but there are times when hugely overlong sentences entangle and straggle rather than march me forwards in my reading.

March 16

I regret at times that I did not start my journal years earlier to coincide with the start of my first systematic reading project, the 19th and 20th novel, which was focused almost exclusively on British, French, and German literature. In my journal then I could have kept track with comments on all or at least most of the novels I was reading. Fortunately, my recollection of all that I read is pretty good. Nearly all the books are in my large library and I know exactly where they are if I ever should need to refresh my memory. Those I didn't have I borrowed from the Acadia U. library, making notes as well as photocopying pages.

By now I have read, in the chronological order of their publication, four of the five Margaret Laurence's works I have in my library: *The Stone Angel*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, *A Bird in the House*, and The Diviners; the third is a collection of short stories and its masterfulness has encouraged me from now on to include this demanding literary form in my reading. This will necessitate some backtracking in my reading and new trips to the Acadia Library since I also wish to go back to the classic masters of the short story such as Balzac, Maupassant, and O'Henry.

I should have read *The Diviners* by this weekend and will be in a position then to make my comments.

March 20

My reading of Laurence's five-part so-called Manawaka series is complete for the time being—I still need to read *A Jest of God* and expect to be able to find a copy in the Odd Book shop or the Acadia Library--confirms the response of earlier readers and critics who have lavished the highest possible praise on the author for these four novels and the collection of short stories, indeed calling her the greatest Canadian novelist of her generation, I had already read *The Stone Angel*, the first novel in the series, and *A Bird in the House* decades ago and my expectations of *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners* were very high. I was not disappointed. The life story of each of the centrally placed women in the novels, Hagar, Stacey, and Morag, unfolds with unflinching clarity and plumbs great depths of character, and *Bird in the House* vividly sets before the reader's eyes the story of a spunky and intelligent young girl Vanessa growing up in the family and social milieu of a 1930's Prairie town. In all three novels the author shows a full mastery of narrative technique, for instance, flawlessly meshing in the *Fire-Dwellers* a spare third person narrative with copious dialogue and interior monologue, while in *The Diviners*, the first person narrative of Morag–the narrative form which is also used in *The Stone Angel*—held my attention with its numerous flashes of what she calls her rolled out inner films of memory, and the legendary tales and songs told and sung by the Scottish-descended Christie Logan, Morag's adoptive father, as well as those of the Métis Jules Tonnerre, Morag's flawed but even so her most enduring lover and the father of her daughter Pique, add a heightened, almost mythical dimension to Morag's turbulent life story. Indeed, the strong Métis presence of family and of people makes *The Diviners* unique among the Canadian novels I have read so far.

March 23

I have started on miscellany of six novels plus a collection of short stories, the publication dates of which range from 1927 to 1982, all the authors, with the exception of Rudy Wiebe (who is well into his 80's now), being deceased. I have just finished Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna*, the earliest of the seven. It was published in New York and, as one can judge from the several successive reprints, was highly successful, and I suspect it was obviously meant to appeal also to an American readership. A CBC television series of 1970's was based on it, but I don't think I ever watched it. Even much more than *The Imperialist* published twenty-three years earlier, it is stamped with a colonial mindset. With the exception of the American Alayne, who becomes the wife of Eden Whiteoak and takes the reader into a sideview of American society and culture, for the denizens of the Jalna estate in southern Ontario Britain is the enduring 'Old Country,' the standard by which all things Canadian must be measured. I admit the author has a talent for a story-telling with interesting characters and vivid descriptions. Still, Jalna does not feel authentic: it is more redolent of rural England than of the Canada of southern Ontario, and with its taste for sentimentality and eccentric characters, above all the rambunctious 99 year-old grandmother, has a distinctly Dickensian flavour; by far the most interesting character for me is the teenaged and troubled Finch.

While I was reading Laurence, I remembered I had read another short story of hers a few years ago; I had found it in large and wide-ranging anthology of Canadian stories selected by Michael Ondaatje and published in the 90's. I had a very good memory of the story "Rain Child," which came out first in a short story collection of Laurence published in 1963. I reread it this morning and my admiration of it has risen even higher. Drawing on the years the author lived and worked

in West Africa it has, not surprisingly, all the psychological acuteness and exceptional feeling for place and milieu one has come to expect from her.

March 25

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and my House* published in 1941 has all the authenticity I found lacking in Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna*, and so it is not surprising that this short novel is considered a classic of Canadian literature. I have benefitted from the full chapter John Moss devotes to it in in his 1974 study, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction*. The setting is the fictional Horizon, a drab Prairie town in the 1930's, town and country harrowed by year-after-year drought and dust storms; time and place are fixed with unsparing realism. The complex central character—we are made to see both her faults and her admirable qualities—is Mrs Bentley (we never learn her first name), through whose first-person narrative, the entire story of her sorely tested relationship with her husband the Rev. Philip Bentley, the perfect foil for her, unfolds, a relationship in which the three other leading characters, Steve, Paul, and Judith, become entangled as the story moves, like a carefully structured symphony, to its fateful conclusion—the musical analogy is Moss's and brilliantly so.

Tiff: A Life of Timothy Findley. This eagerly awaited biography of Timothy Findley by Sherill Grace—a distinguished literary scholar and professor emerita at UBC—arrived for me at the bookstore where I had ordered it. I had seen it advertised in the *Gay and Lesbian Review* and became myself very eager to read it. I can already see it is a thoughtful and meticulously researched work, and I am truly looking forward to reading it, slowly and carefully.

March 28

Off to Halifax and Bedford today with Chris today: this has become a regular Sunday treat for me since last April, especially the 1-2 hours we spend in the Harry DeWolf Park on the Bedford Basin. Glad I signed up yesterday for my first vaccination against the Covid-19 virus on Thursday, April 1, the second one to take place on July 15. Doing it online was quite a rigmarole with that lengthy questionnaire to complete; the average senior citizen would probably need help; signing up by phone would be even worse, much more time consuming as you'd probably have to make repeated attempts to get through.

I have been almost totally absorbed over the past few days by Sherrill Grace's biography of Timothy Findley. Her biography gains enormously by the copious use she makes of the numerous journals, note- and workbooks in which Findley wrote for most of his life. I have also glanced at Farley Mowat's *People of the Deer*, his riveting account of the two years he spent with the Inuit in the Keewatin region, north west of Hudson Bay. Pleased to have a copy of the first edition published in 1952, with its fine cover intact. It was expensive but worth every dollar I paid for it at my favourite used bookstore in Wolfville.

March 29

Learned from Grace's book that in the 70's Findley wrote the script for many documentaries and works of fiction produced by the CBC for television, including, to my great surprise, that for the 12-part series*, The Whiteoaks of Jalna*, which, as I mentioned earlier, I have never seen. This, of

course, was at that time bread and butter work for him, but even so one must surmise that he had a considerable regard for de la Roche's work.. This fact, though, does not change my mixed appraisal of her *Jalna.*

March 30

A shocking report: Canada's record of fatalities due to the covid-19 virus in nursing homes—or to use the commonly used euphemism now, long-term care facilities—is the worst in economically developed countries: the lessons that should have been learned from the first wave of the pandemic have evidently not been put into practice (although, fortunately, in my province the record is much better now); As I said already a long time ago, the government / governments (federal and provincial) should have vigorously intervened by declaring an emergeucy and then putting all the for-profit institutions under public authority, just like the hospitals are: deeds not words.

The article I read in the current issue of the Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies was just as disturbing. The article dealt with the ethical issues openly discussed by the Dutch in handling the pandemic crisis, especially those having to be faced when the hospitals are overwhelmed by the number of very sick patients and some sort of triaging seems inevitable, the paramount issue, of course, being the criteria that should be used. the chance of recovery for the patient, or perhaps simply his or her age. It is shocking to see that in the public discourse on this issue there is a willingness to consider age tout court, the rationale being that the right to life of the young outweighs that of the elderly, say those above 75. Some are even convinced that euthanasia is the right answer for the elderly and very sick, sickness including dementia. Holland is well known for its extremely liberal laws on euthanasia, but I do wonder if the pendulum there has swung too far towards an extreme laissez-faire.

April 1

I have jumped ahead in my current reading list and read over the past two days Rudy Wiebe's 1982 collection of short stories, *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories*; once the Acadia Library functions normally again, I will get hold of his much acclaimed first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. I must say right at the beginning that, on the whole, I enjoyed these stories less than those in *A Bird in the House* by Margaret Lawrence since a few of the stories, above all "The Naming of Albert Johnson," are, in my opinion, way overwritten, whether it be the narrative or the dialogue. I was reminded of the similar overwriting in some of the interior monologues in *The Temptations of Great Bear.* In reading the short story I mentioned I could not help but contrast it with the spare but evocative writing in a short story by Jack London also set in the wintertime wilderness of the Far North. The adage "less is more" applies most certainly to the short story; I am thinking here not only of Margaret Laurence but also of Alice Munro. On the other hand, I don't want to be too critical: there are several very good stories such as, "Chinook Christmas," The Year We Gave Away the Land" with its echoes of Wiebe's novel, and "Oolulik," with its grim story of the tragic consequences of the coming of the white man to the traditional way of the Inuit (very reminiscent of what I have read in Mowat's *People of the Deer*).

It was already clear from my reading of *The Temptations of Great Bear* that Wiebe's worldview is a Christian one, coloured specifically by the Mennonite community in which he grew up. (It was interesting to find out that the German of that community was Low German—not the standard High German—which is very close to Dutch). Not surprisingly, this comes through in "Chinook Christmas," but also in several other stories, including the last, "The Angel of the Tar Sands," which caught my eye right from the beginning and must have been written at a time when the exploitation of the oilsands in Alberta had just begun. With its supernatural apparition of the angel caught in the tar sands, it is astonishingly prophetic of the dire environmental consequences of this enterprise.

April 2

My birthday today. Yesterday my first vaccination—everything was expeditiously done and went well; only a slightly sore left arm early this morning. And in a few hours off by bus with Glenn to Dartmouth and Halifax. I'm looking forward to staying at the Dartmouth Hilton, where Chris will pick us up on Sunday.

April 5

An almost completely rained out Easter weekend, most of it spent in our hotel room watching movies—the 1950 movie *Caged*, which we got courtesy of TCM, stood out for me. The highlight of our stay in Dartmouth was the Micmac Mall, where I bought a handsome silver ring for Glenn.

I finished Sherrill Grace's magnificently done biography of Timothy Findley already several days ago. Looking back at the author's life now I appreciate to the fullest what became his life motto, "Against Despair." His life and his life's work, all his writing—not just the famous novels but also all that he kept on entering in his journals and note- and workbooks over the decades—have this as their grand signature, as it were, of meaning.

I read Wiebe's short story, "Oolulik," as a kind of grim foil to Mowat's *People of the Dear*. An unrelieved bleakness pervades the former, which takes the form of a first-person narrative told by an Inuit man who, despite his best efforts to bring help and food to his suffering communities, is overwhelmed by the tragedy besetting his people. Mowat's is a memoir of the years he spent with Inuit communities, sharing their lives and forging deep friendships, but remaining an outsider, and as such, paradoxically, despite the tragedy he sees unfolding for the Inuit people, he brings a perspective of hope into his story, namely that the white man and the Inuit can work together to build a better future for both.

April 8

After a wait of nearly 12 days Brian and the other tenants in his apartment building got his landline telephone service back. The interruption could have been easily fixed within 24 hours: why the wait by Bell Canada? Other, more urgent priorities? Are landline telephones considered

by Bell a relic from the pre-wifi past? The serious inconvenience Bell inflicted on its landline customers is inexusable.

Have watched two memorable movies within the past two days. *The News of the World*, released only three months ago but already available in dvd amply deserves the accolades it has received from critics. There may be a third Oscar award for best actor for Tom Hanks, and the young Helena Zengel deserves an Oscar as best supporter actor for her truly magnificent performance.

The Quarry, which I was able to watch thanks to HBO, is a far more modestly produced movie but offers an awesome probing of character and society, raw in its intensity but also fittingly slow moving at times in the manner of cinema véiité; the drawn out and open-ended conclusion combines these two. I was gripped by the splendid acting of the main two protagonists played by Shea Wigham and Michael Shannon—I know the latter from earlier movies and television series--as well of the actor who plays the young Mexican-American man who ends up being charged with a murder committed by the so-called Reverend David Martin (played by Wigham).

April 9

I was absolutely right, just as I was with Farley Mowat's *People of the Dear*, to put Morley Callaghan's *That Summer in Paris* on my current reading list. In its rich portrait of expatriate life in 1920's Paris and its astute but at the same time finely nuanced observation and judgment of character (above all, of course, of Hemingway and Fitzgerald) I cannot help but think that it is superior to Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. We also learn much about Callaghan himself, the man and the writer, who already got to know Hemingway well while working for the Toronto Star in the early 1920's. I am glad I have a collection of Callaghan's short into which I'll be dipping for some time to come, and I will also try to get hold of at least one of his novels.

Hugh Garner's *The Sin Sniper* published in 1970 (I have the 1978 reprint which changes the title to *Stone Cold Dead* after the movie based on the novel) is a gritty and well-crafted fiction which takes you into the pauperized underbelly of central Toronto in the mid-60's. Its central personage, inspector Walter McDumont, is reminiscent of Georges Simenon's inspector Maigret rather than of the private eyes in the crime novels and stories of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Mickey Spillane. The Toronto which is laid out before our eyes is still almost exclusively European-descended, pre-gentrified Cabbagetown is "the largest Anglo-Saxon slum in the world," "mentally retarded" is the moniker for the cognitively challenged, and the polite word for gay men and lesbian women is "homosexuals," but "fags" and "dykes" roll far more easily off the lips, including of the police, who miss no opportunity to harass them. Even McDumont stoops to this at one point when he interrogates, in connection with one of the slayings committed by the still elusive serial killer, a dance choreographer—admittedly somewhat arrogant and uncooperative--who is working on a show for the CBC. This and other homophobic instances made me cringe certainly, On the other hand, I had to admit the inspector is both energetic and painstaking in his job and he directs his large police team effectively. I also have to admit that this novel represents social realism—no sugar-coating please--- at its best

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April 12

Watched, courtesy of TCM, the 1963 movie, *Hud*, two nights ago. The movie's setting, the almost bare, monotonously flat plains with their cattle-ranches and bleak towns of Texas, everything appropriately filmed in black-and-white, was the perfect background for an equally bleak, even grim story, although there was the occasional dark-comical touch, as in the men's pig-walking contest—which, however, would nor have pleased any society for the prevention of cruelty to animals. The acting of Paul Newman, Melvyn Douglas, Patricia Neal, and the young actor who played the role of Lonnie, was superb, and it was not surprising that two best Oscar awards for supporting best actor, male and female, were won, The tour-de-force episode was the graphically portrayed mass slaughter of a large herd of cattle in order to prevent the feared calamitous spread of a foot-and-mouth infection How that was filmed without, as one could see, the resort to special effects is a marvel to me.

Finished reading of Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business* yesterday. This was the second time for me—the first time probably more than 10 years ago. This fresh reading raised my estimate of the novel immensely: social realism there is certainly, but also compelling characters and their stories who foray into the realms of the magical, the marvelous, even the supernatural. Now that I have read all of Timothy Findlay's major novels I have a much greater appreciation for this opening -up of the imagination. Davies's prose style is a delight, touched with erudition, wit and elegance. I must read more of him; I have fortunately another of his novels in my collection.

April 13

I am glad I have apologized for losing my temper with Glenn yesterday when he called me from Just Us on his cell phone to share with me a difficulty—a minor one really—he had just encountered at the Royal Bank in Wolfville. The cell phone connection was not ideal and, secondly, I was getting impatient with what I perceived his slowness in explaining the situation. I must have been slightly feeling down when I was listening to him; it is at a time like this that I tend to get impatient and irritable. I can't really say I was in a truly depressive mood—I had been feeling pretty positive ever since I got up that morning--although this was my excuse when I phoned Glenn later in the day when he was at home again. I must watch this propensity of mine to impatience and irritability, for I have also shown it at times to Brian in our telephone chats, and it also comes out—although not always very visibly---when I am experiencing delays of any sort, e.g. in a line-up or carrying out some time-consuming transaction online. Patiencia, patiencia, sempre.

April 16

I have decided to concentrate on short stories for a while, Canadian short stories. I have already nearly finished a collection of short stories by Morley Callaghan which obviously date from the earliest period of his writing career, the 20's and 30's when he was already highly regarded outside Canada, having Scribner's as his first publisher. This explains why some stories have American settings, especially New York; the stories set in Canada are set mainly in Toronto. I have created in my mind a three-part typology of short stories: 1) climactic, 2) situational, and 3) sketches. In climactic short stories, the story moves towards a firm and definite resolution in what I would call a hard landing—either good or bad— whereas situational short stories have an ending that I would call provisional and have what I would call a soft landing. Sketches are short stories where the story itself is not of paramount importance, the emphasis being on description

of milieu and of character-type; the latter morphs easily into caricature, often with a satiric or ironic edge; Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* comes to mind. Callaghan's stories are almost all of the second kind, exploring, within the brief compass allowed by this literary form, interpersonal relationships that are subjected to some kind of social hardship (e.g. unemployment, as one might especially expect from the 30's) or emotional stress, relationships between spouses, parents and children, siblings, lovers, friends, and so forth. He does such stories very well, writing with admirable concision but at the same time with pointed detail. A few stories straddle the climactic and situational type, the best one, I think, "Two Brothers," The two I consider climactic, namely "Amuck in the Bush," and "Two Fishermen," climax with a violence that stretches my credulity and are not, in my opinion, among the best.

Just finished reading the last story. It was abundantly clear to me right from the beginning of the collection that Callaghan was working entirely within the mode of social realism. There is another mode and tradition, of course, in this literary form, namely that of the fantastic, perhaps even the supernatural, going back to Edgar Allen Poe, and is exemplified by many a horror story. I am sure to encounter this later in other authors, starting with Findley's collection, *Dinner Along the Amazon*.

April 19

Over the past week I have also been reading the two most recent thrillers of Steve Berry, *The Warsaw Protocol* and *The Kaiser's Web*. For many years now I am a big fan of his thrillers the story of which is always driven by a historical mystery and transports the reader to a great diversity of locations all across the world. These two novels did not disappoint me, although I do have some criticisms. The horrors of the communist era in Poland seem to me to be exaggerated in *The Warsaw Protocol*, for the robust presence of the Catholic Church during these admittedly repressive decades acted as a powerful countervailing force against the worst totalitarian excesses. Much of story of *The Kaiser's Web* unfolds as a kind of alternative history, a kind of narrative literature I am much taken by; I think, for instance, of Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, both the novel and the movie based on it, and of Len Deighton's *SS GB*, of which there also a movie version which I still have to get hold of.

I have more criticisms of *The Kaiser's Web*. Here I share the criticism of Brian, who has also read many of Berry's novels, namely the excessive number of gunfights in the more recent novels—*The Warsaw Protocol*, fortunately, is much more subdued in this respect—is this catering to American tastes? These scenes have become pretty well formulaic in Berry's thrillers and add absolutely nothing to the story. Then there is a question of chronology. It is mentioned that the German chancellor, Marie Eisenhuth, a central figure, who has served 16 years in her position and is now running for re-election, has had Angela Merkel as her predecessor. However, the main story is set about 75 years after the fall of the Third Reich, which would place it in the year 2020 or 2021. The chronology just doesn't jibe. Finally, I object to the Afrikaans language being characterized as "twisted Dutch," sort of like "English slang." This is an insulting misnomer: yes, Afrikaans developed over the centuries from the Dutch as spoken originally by the Dutch settlers, but in doing so it became a full-fledged language of its own and is now still one of the official languages of the Republic of South Africa, a language of distinguished prose and poetry.

April 20

Watched last night what I simply have to consider one of the very best Hollywood (United Artists) of the 1950's: *Patterns*, blessed with superb acting, an extraordinarily thoughtful and well-crafted script by Rod Sterling, and last but not least, a most striking cinematography featuring vivid shots of New York with the towering skyscrapers in moody, even ominous chiaroscuro, and the thronging masses of people everywhere. The movie is drama about big business in America and its grand capitalist aspirations: on the one hand, a capitalism—and unfortunately far too much of it—of the Social Darwinism dynamic, that is, "Survival of the Fittest," and, by contrast, a capitalism which is humanistic, having a just regard for the wellbeing of the workers and their families, and indeed of society as a whole.

April 22

How welcome the arrival of spring was a year ago in the midst of the pandemic's first wave. It is no different this year, with the added joy that spring is early: the crocuses were out a month ago, the daffodils and forsythia bushes are in bloom, the grass is already green, and it seems almost certain that there will be also lots of green on the trees by early next month.

I have just finished Finley's *Dining Along the Amazon River*. The impact each story has made on me has varied a great deal. The masterpiece is, in my opinion, the powerful and haunting "Lemonade," in which a boy's world is shattered by his mother's descent into a madness which ends in suicide. The third-person narrative unfolds this tragedy with an almost inexorable inevitability, against which the episodes of boyish pleasure experienced by the young Harper in the earlier parts of the story gain a special poignancy. There is an enormous variety of theme and style in the remaining stories of a sort we do not see in Callaghan's where the thematic and stylistic norm is basically that of social realism; even those stories of Findley that seem, at first, to be contained within this mode usually push heavily towards the surreal and fantastic where relationships are often wildly dysfunctional and emotions explode with shrieking loudness. There is one grimly dystopian tale, "What Mrs Felton Knew," where after a placid start the reader is soon confronted with the horror of genocide. The tranquil "The People on the Shore" is obviously semi-autobiographical and a favourite of mine. I also liked "War," in which in the summer of 1940 the boy Neil refuses to accept that his dad has enlisted in the army and is about to be shipped to England. However, while I enjoyed the implicit satire of American middle class mores in "Hello Cheeverland Goodbye," I found the ending inexplicably abrupt and gruesome, with the dog holding a human hand in its paws.

April 23

I will now move on to the short stories of Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Munro, nearly all of which I have read before, but not recently (i.e. within the last five years), so a return to these will lead to an even greater enjoyment and appreciation. The same applies to the many Canadian novels by authors who, as far as I know, are still active, I will be reading next, or rather reading again for a second time; they and the short stories are a veritable treasure for me as they mark the creation of a literature which ranks with the world's best.

Later today: I was pleasantly reminded that I have three collections of Gallant's short stories. In the biggest and most recently published of these (a hardcover), *The Selected Stories of Mavis Gallant*, the author offers a Preface in which, among others, she recommends we do not read her stories by way of going immediately going from one story to the following but intersperse our reading with other reading. I will stretch "one" to two or three and intersperse these with reading Atwood and Munro, also two or three stories each; this should give me an especially sound basis for comparing the three authors,

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April 24

With the exception of the short story collections of Morley Callaghan, Margaret Laurence, David Findley, and Rudy Wiebe which I have already read, I have before me now a total of twelve collections of short stories by Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood., and Alice Munro. Many of them I have already read but often only cursorily or a long time ago, so I have plenty of good reading ahead of me. I have good reason to believe I have all of Atwood's short stories, in a total of seven collections, the first published in 1977, the last in 2014 The two collections I have of Munro's stories come to only sixteen of them, but hers are typically well above average in length and a few of them could be considered novellas. As I said yesterday, I am going to read them at a moderate pace but should be able to make some tentative comparisons fairly soon. I recall from my earlier reading that some of Atwood's later stories enter the realm of the fantastic, but my recollection of Gallant and Munro tells me that they stay pretty well in the mode of social and—I should also add—psychological realism. Eventually, I will also pick some stories from *From Ink Lake*, an anthology of Canadian stories selected by Michael Ondaatje; from it I already got Laurence's "Rain-Child."

April 26

The huge increase in daily infections in NS is worrisome but, I am glad to hear from experts, it is not dire and in a few weeks the worst may be over; New Brunswick and Newfoundland were successful in getting themselves out of similar situations.

I have started on the short stories of Gallant, Munro, and Atwood. I read Gallant's "By the Sea," from her 1988 collection *In Transit*, and enjoyed its evocation of a Spanish Mediterranean Sea resort already sought out u the Brits in the 1950's; it offered an entertaining, vivid view of that milieu enlivened with many touches of humour. However, "The Moslem Wife," which I got from *The Selected Stories of Mavis Gallant*, was a disappointment: set on the Italian and French Rivieras of the Interwar years and a bit of WWII, and one of her earliest writings (although not published until 1976 and probably much reworked by then),it struck me as unfocused and turgid, replete with eccentric characters and quirky incidents that stretched my credulity. (The most bizarre of the incidents comes when Netta, the story's female protagonist, kicks her lazy cousin Jack, her future husband, so hard that one of his legs was "paralyzed for a long time"—so much for "The Moslem Woman," the typical sort of woman, as early opinion in the story had it, she would eventually become. In contrast, from the same collection, "Across the Bridge,"—which I am sure I read for the first time many years ago—was a pleasure for me with its tale of an engagement to marry broken and then renewed between two bourgeois families in early 1950's Paris. Even so, at this point it already seems I will have to be very selective as to the stories of Gallant I will read.

Munro's "The Love of a Good Women" in the collection of the same title, by virtue of its length and its many memorable characters and their entanglements, struck me as almost being a novella in its complexity, and brilliantly interwoven with all of these is a story of a murder in a small southwestern Ontario town of in the early 1950's that only comes to light through a deathbed confession. I had read the story years earlier but only cursorily; now for the first time I think I began to appreciate fully Munro's immense gift for social realism coupled with a clear-eyed empathy that does not descend to sentimentality.

Finally, the first three in Atwood's first (1977) collection of short stories read by me for the first time, I am sure, for than decades ago. Instant recognition and enjoyment, with an even greater appreciation now of their literary art, as, for instance, in the first story, "The War in the Bathroom," with its use of both a third- and first-person narrator, the latter understood by me as the unnamed protagonist's superego's voice—a fussy voice--chiding,and advising her.

April 27

It is obvious now that I will also be very selective as to which short stories by Alice Munro I will want to read thoroughly. "The Love of a Good Woman" is magnificent. (the "Good Woman" is Enid, the caretaker of the dying 27-year od Mrs Quinn who is privy to the murder of Dr Willens by her husband, Rupert; it is Enid's goodness and love for her fellow man and woman that stands out as a beacon in her claustrophobically narrow-minded community.) I remember now that this was the only story in this 1998 collection that I read with some care, albeit still only cursorily. The story's opening episode with the three boys exploring and roughing it in the countryside around the town and then coming upon a car half-submerged in a creek and with the body of a dead man inside is unforgettable.

I am far more demanding of contemporary than much earlier literature, whether it be a novel, a short story, a play, or poetry. If the first chapter of a novel or the first two pages of a short story does not grab me it is done for me. I paged through the 1998 collection and found that only one more story caught my interest, namely "The Children Stay," a story of a woman's adulterous affair that comes with an ironic echo of Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina –these two protagonists in the respective novels of Flaubert and Tolstoy are explicitly named-- because Pauline's children, in contrast, do stay with their mother. This story caught my attention at the very beginning because of its evocation of the grandiose landscape of Vancouver Island where some of the story takes place. I will look a little more closely to see if there are more stories worth pursuing in this collection, otherwise I will move on to the 2004 collection, *Runaway*.

I have continued to read in *The Selected Stories of Mavis Gallant.* I was struck by "The Latehomecomer," which is a story obviously outside Gallant's direct experience but worked vey well for me. Thomas, a 21 year old German prisoner of war] —he had been a member of the Hitler Youth in charge of an anti-aircraft gun at the end of WWII—returns home from France, where he had been kept far too long because of bureaucratic bungling. Amidst the ruins of Berlin he is reunited with his mother, who has in the meantime remarried after her husband's death, but his older brother Chris is still missing. Thomas still has vivid memories of the French girl who befriended him; he had found her pretty but at the same time marked by the

malnutrition brought on by the Occupation. The story follows quirky steps of his readjustment in a completely unsentimental way.

April 29

I thought that with a somewhat slower pace of reading I could still unearth a few more gems in *The Love of a Good Woman*, and I was right, for I took to "Rich as Stink" and "Before the Change, " and then went on to the collection, *Runaway,* and immersed myself gladly in the story bearing the same title. I will do a little more reconnoitering and perhaps reading closely in this collection.

Going back to the typology suggested it recently, all of Munro's stories I have read so far exemplify the climactic and the situational, I would classify only one of the four stories of Gallant I have read thus far, "Across the Bridge," as doing the same, the other three, even the longish "The Moslem Wife," as situational only.

"Before the Change," which describes with graphic detail an abortion procedure well illustrates what has been long been recognized as Munro's unconventionality as a story-teller. "Runaway" leaves the reader with two loose ends in the plot, obviously intended as such by the author, first the black-mailing scheme against Sylvia which Clark proposes to his wife Carla and which she must carry out—it never happens—and second, the disappearance of Flora the goat; she is never found although at the very end Carla fears she may come upon her physical remains.

May 1

My prediction of a while ago was correct: the trees are very visibly greening now and, moreover, tulips are coming up, some of them in bloom already; Spring is certainly in full swing.

The May issue of the *National Geographic* had a fascinating article on whales. Its upshot was that these impressive marine mammals, from the medium-sized orcas to the truly giant species, can be said to possess cultures somewhat analogous to human cultures by virtue of these animals' striking adaptivity, not suspected before, to changing conditions and environments, by their complex group and interindividual relationships, and by their marvellously far-reaching, precise, and indeed sophisticated powers of communication, including what has been characterized as kinds of singing in many species. All these cannot be explained as simply genetically driven: nurture next to nature, to use the familiar dyad, applies here. This is an issue of the magazine I want to keep for myself for future reference.

I have read two more stories in *Runaway*, namely "Passion" and "Trespasses." These, too, are situationally and climactically driven stories, and I found them as compelling as "The Love of a Good Women." Tragedy plays a profound role in both, especially in "Passion." I took to the narrative structure of the latter, whereby Grace, as she drives past the former home of the Traverse family in small town and rural Ontario south of Ottawa, recalls her interactions with that family decades earlier; these events took place in the early 50's and ended in the terrible tragedy of death, possibly as suicide, for Neil Traverse, with whom she had become very briefly romantically involved during a night-ride, and who, otherwise, might have become her brother-in-law.

After some initial hesitation, I have begun to recognize the unique qualities of Munro's stories—above all, their emotional and tonal complexity—comedic, tragic, but also profoundly tragic at times—and I'll certainly go back to her in the future. It is time now to go back to Gallant; in her stories I already see a genteel quality which is totally different from anything in Munro. After Gallant, I'll turn to Atwood, and continue to read from her seven collections.

May 2

After reading four more short stories—two very short indeed—by Gallant, I have had enough. I am sure that they have literary merit—Robertson Davies in an Afterword to one of the three collections I have is enthusiastic—but I found that what I read provided me mostly with glimpses into lives lived in quiet—sometimes not so quiet—desperation. I like a lot better what Munro does with the short story in her much earthier and tougher fashion. I am now laying the short story in its entirety aside for the time being and will concentrate instead on non-fiction, although there will always be time for reading for a second time great contemporary novels—especially those by Canadian authors—of which I have plenty in my library.

Chris lent me a most innovative introduction to Freud that in part looks like a graphic novel. It worked for me, but it did not convert me to Freud's ideas and theorizing, with which, of course, I have been long familiar, from my university years onwards. It does motivate me, however, to turn back to the magisterial work, *Does God Exist*, by the great Hans Kűng (who died last month), which I read for the first time 40 years ago, in order to remind me what he says in his always magnificently scholarly and thoughtful fashion about Freud.

I have also been turning to biblical literature recently. I have been in a kind of blue funk—melancholy, to use the more elegant word— for some time and thought that the right reading there would greatly help me. Many of the Psalms certainly have and also chapters 40-45 of Isaiah with their majestic prophecies of the coming of the reign of God and his Servant—the Servant who "will not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smouldering wick" (the words I quoted at the internment of Scott's ashes in August 2009); such a powerful affirmation of the ubiquitous and omnipotent Grace of God—and here I have realized for the first time that these prophecies most tellingly anticipate Jesus' teachings, in the synoptic Gospels, of the Kingdom of God.

May 4

I have started to read *Does God Exist* in its entirety now, from the beginning to the end, and then I will turn to a new and fresh reading of all of Küng's works I have in my library; fortunately, I have many. It will be for me a great journey of rediscovery and renewed appreciation of the theologian who passed away four weeks ago and whom I, without any hesitation, call the most formidable thinker of the past half century and to whom I will always be immensely indebted, both intellectually and spiritually. I hope, indeed trust, that his magnificent heritage will be kept alive everywhere across the world, both Christian and non-Christian.

May 7

Reading K.'s *Does God Exist*? for the second time after reading it first four decades ago is an unforgettable experience. Even more than then I stand in awe of his erudition and his intimate knowledge of and his penetrating insights into the momentous developments in Western thought since the age of Descartes and well into the 20th century. Although a lot has happened in the world in science, technology, culture, society, and political life since the early 1980's his work speaks with equal thoughtfulness and urgency to men and women of the 21st century. I also have a much greater appreciation now of the exquisite care with which he has structured and developed his argument over more than 700 pages (not counting the massive endnotes!) towards his final affirmation of the supreme reality of God. K's makes great demands intellectually on the reader but the fundamental import of his book, a true *opus perenne*, should register powerfully with anyone.

May 9

What a wonderful hour Chris and I spent at the Rotary Ridge Stile Park with its panoramic view of the Annapolis Valley to the north and the Gaspereau Valley to the south. Chris jogged along Ridge Road while I walked mostly on the grass and followed a trail; I am sure I will find others as well. The park is within such a short driving distance that we can be sure we'll be going there often especially now that Halifax and environs are closed to us for the time being because of the lockdown. I enjoyed the park as much, in it rural beauty, as the attractive, stylishly urban Harry DeWolf Park on the Bedford Basin, where Chris and I had been spending many of our Sunday afternoons since April of last year. All in all, I felt as relaxed and joyous as I hadn't been in weeks.

Later in the evening: I've been feeling both sentimental and buoyant tonight and so I decided to play for the first time in about 18 months the beautiful video that Sylvia so skillfully put together for me from the pictures I had selected from Scott's (then still named Brian) huge collection of slide photos he had taken over a period of ten years: 1975-81, Scott and I in Vancouver, Toronto, and Wolfville plus our travels by Amtrak in the U.S., and 1971-75, his years with family and friends in Amherst and Vancouver. For the background music, both classical and contemporary, I had given her several of my CDs. For years I had been playing the video on his and my birthday (November 29 and April 2), but last year I just didn't get around to it. Was it the pandemic? But that was all the more reason to play this video of such wonderful memories. Strange. But now I will resume playing it at least once a year. It still so meaningful for me, just like visiting Amherst once a year and putting flowers on his small grave marker in Amherst next to his parents' gravestone.

May 11

First thing I did this morning after I woke up when it was still dark was to complete online the 2021 census form which was due today. I'm pretty sure I got the long form: lots of detailed questions and it took me almost 30 minutes. Everything went fine and I was glad to be done with it and to go back to sleep. This was the first time I did it online and had been somewhat nervous about doing it this way.

Having finished reading *Does God Exist?*, I have turned to K.'s *On Being A Christian*, which is the first in what I consider K.'s great triad of books of foundational theology which was

published in the 1970's and early 1980's, *Eternal Life?* being the third. It is less demanding intellectually than the book which came right after it and so I am able to read it faster, but it loses none of its inspirational impact thereby.

May 13

I am about to start to start reading the third book in K.'s great triad. I read it for the first time in the mid-eighties and then went back to it many years later in the wake of Scott's death. I'll never forget the rich comfort K/s book gave me as I reread it, confirming in this way the luminous burst of certainty I had experienced in the midst of tears on the day after my loved one's death, namely that in God's Grace it was ultimately well with Scott. It will be good for me to reread now this great book of hope and comfort.

I could not have chosen a better time to read this great triad of foundational theology, as I like to call it, for the fits of melancholy—I like this old-fashioned word better than "depression— which have, more than usual, taken hold of me over the past few weeks; I am sure the fact that finally, after months of self-congratulation by all of Nova Scotia, the pandemic's third wave also hit our province hard, had something to do with it. I am beginning to sense that turning to this giant of a theologian was absolutely the right thing to do.

May 14

A beautiful morning this morning amid all the signs of what I'd call high spring: flowers everywhere, the rich green grass with most lawns already mowed once, all trees in leaf or on the point of sprouting.

Glanced through Küng's major 1967 book, *The Church*, last night. I imagine that already in the sixties it sent alarm bells ringing in the Roman Curia and in conservative Catholic orthodoxy in general. For instance, in K's very fine discussion of the Eucharist—which any believing Protestant would 100% agree with—there is not even an allusion to the doctrine of transubstantiation Also glanced through *Küng in Conflict*, a 1981 publication— Leonard Sidler its editor and translator—which thoroughly documents the course of K.'s conflict with the conservative establishment of the Church that ended in the termination of the official *missio* from the Church to teach as a specifically Catholic theologian at his university.

When I have finished *Eternal Life?* I'll move on to three more of K.'s books in my library, first the one which uses Thomas Kuhn's well known thesis of paradigm shift in order to chart the spiritual and intellectual challenges the Catholic Church has faced since its beginnings and still very much grapples with today, the other two marking the beginning of K's theological dialogue with the other world religions, a massive undertaking which led to a number of major publications, one of which deals with Islam, a work of truly magnificent scholarship. I am very pleased to have this in my library. I have read it within the past few years, so I'll hold off for the time being; the same applies to the two volumes of his autobiography which I also bought fairly recently.

May 17

Looking back to a great weekend with two afternoons spent in the outdoors with Chris.

Finished *Eternal Life?* yesterday, and in the evening started on K.s (with three co-authors: Josef van Ess, Heinrich von Stientencron, and Heinz Bechert), *Christianity and the World Religions*, published 1986 (English translation). Finished reading this morning the section on Islam, in which K. put forward what I think is a brilliant hypothesis, namely the religious milieu in which Mohammed moved may have included contacts with a Judeo-Christianity which had been superseded already centuries ago by Hellenized and Latin Christianity but may have survived in isolated communities in the Near East, including possibly Arabia. The Judeo-Christians, which originally had been based in Jerusalem prior to the destruction of that city in 70 A.D, had shied away from identifying Jesus Christ as the Son of God coequal as God with God the Father.

I am reading now the three books by K. immediately past *Eternal Life?* in the order of their publication.

May 19

I've read the sections on Hinduism and Buddhism in *Christianity and the World Religions* very quickly since, based on quite bit of the past reading I have done, I was already fairly familiar with these two. However, K. has reminded me that Hinduism comes in such a variety of faiths, theologies, and cultic practices that, far more than even Christianity and Islam, it amounts to a composite of religions, and in Buddhism, too, its two principal branches, Theravada and Mahayana, are so different from each other that here too it is tempting to speak of two different religions. By way of personal comment I also want to add that the aura of tolerance that surrounds both Hinduism and Buddhism in the eyes of their many admirers in the West is rather misleading. With the former, I cannot help but think of the bloody Hindu vs Moslem violence killing perhaps a million people that accompanied the split-up of British India into the independent republics of India and Pakistan, the sporadic Hindu-Moslem clashes, sometimes costing many lives, in today's India, and the pronounced Hindu nationalism of the BJP Party that now rules the country. With regard to Buddhism, I am reminded of the bloody civil war that ravaged Sri Lanka for decades, the near-genocidal violence perpetrated on the Rohingya Moslem minority in Myanmar (Burma) —in both countries the large majority of the population being Theravada Buddhist—and, as I recall from my reading of a book on Buddhism and the political sphere, a brutal 18th century war between Thailand (also Theravada Buddhist) and Burma that saw the slaughter of thousands of non-combatants. Finally, Mahayana ("Pure Land" Amida) Buddhism, which is interlayered with the native Shintoism of Japan, did nothing to prevent that country's march of imperialist conquest in the thirties and forties; one only needs to think of the Rape of Nanking and Japan's brutal treatment of its subject peoples in general and of its prisoners of war.

May 21

I should have mentioned a few days ago that the idea that Jesus was not crucified but was, before that could happen, taken up by God (as the Qu'ran has it) might have come to Mohammed from Docetist Christianity; there may have been such communities in or near Arabia as late as the 6th century.

Re: the ceasefire reading between Hamas and Israel: will it be like the 2014 ceasefire and thus will there be no end to this sheer madness? There is right as well as blame on both sides. In any case, as I see it the Israelis must immediately stop expropriating Palestinian land and building Jewish settlements on that land and offer generous compensation—to be distributed by a neutral authority—for what they have already taken. On the other hand, Hamas and indeed all radicalized Palestinians must stop their hate campaigns and recognize the state of Israel. Only then can the two-state solution finds its fulfillment.

I have finished *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*. In it K. indeed does what he says at the beginning of his Foreword: "This book is a document of a theological career," including of his signal ecumenical outreach, which started already when he was still in his 20's, and now was also beginning to engage with the other world religion. The book is indeed a superb encapsulation of his wonderful journey as a believer and theologian. I was taken by K.'s lengthy section at the book's beginning where he looks at the Reformation and the failure of Erasmus, because of that great Christian humanist's vacillation in the end—such as indicated by his absence, despite the emperor Charles V.'s express invitation, from the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530—to give effective reinforcement and focus to the calls from within the Catholic Church for moderate but still meaningful reforms, thus guaranteeing the permanence of Luther's break-away.

May 21

Watched the 1982 movie *E.T.* (on dvd) last night with Glenn. I had seen it for the first time almost four decades ago and I still remembered kids in the cinema sobbing aloud as E.T. lay—so it seemed at least—dying. This time, however, my appreciation of this superbly well made—directed by Steven Spielberg— and thoughtful movie went deeper and even went so far as to detect Christian-religious motifs hovering over it: E.T. himself, a being from another world, hardly handsome but smart, benevolent, and loving; E.T. dying and then coming back to life again (death and resurrection?); his return to his own world (ascension to heaven?); and the kids, the movie's heroes blessed with an open-minded and kind-hearted curiosity and great courage, initiative and resourcefulness; didn't Jesus say that heaven is above all for children and those like children?

May 22

I did not spend much time with *Paradigm Change in Theology*—co-edited by Küng and an American scholar, David Tracy, and with the German and English versions published both in 1989 ---since its subject was already introduced at length by K. in his *Theology for the Third Millennium*. The symposium, which drew theologians from three continents, including the Canadian Gregory Baum shows that while the basic idea is sound and has a lot of heuristic value, it needs the inevitable refining and nuancing.

This is as far as I will go with Hans Küng for the time being. I still look forward to rereading his magisterial book on Islam and the two volumes of his autobiography.

I reminded myself yesterday that earlier this month was the 76th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands; unfortunately, just as in last year, the celebrations had to be scaled down because of the pandemic—I trust that 2022 will be much better. I thus also reminded myself that I have a small library of books on the Netherlands under Nazi occupation, including three Dutch novels, which I read in my teens and early 20's, and of which I have just reread—very quickly—Anne de Vries's *Reis door de Nacht*; *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I read first in English many decades ago; and the English version of the 1941-43 diary of Etty Hillesum—published not until the 1980's— who like Anne died in the Holocaust. I bought the last book many years ago but am now giving it an extra-careful second reading and finding myself even more touched by Etty's high intelligence and culture and, above all, by her deep spirituality, her profound love of God from which issued also her love of her fellow wo/man; I am happy to see it has been widely acclaimed and has passed through many different translations.

May 26

Last weekend I chose four additional books from my small library on wartime Holland and have just finished reading them; all of these, too, came for me as second readings. The Dutch *Engelandvaarders*, written by K. Norel, takes in the wartime Netherlands and the Dutch resistance with a more complex story-line than *Reis door de Nacht*, which, I suspect, was written by its author especially with younger readers in mind Both. In both, too, the story is told from a solidly *Gereformeerd* Christian perspective which many Dutch readers nowadays would find it quite dated (these novels were, after all, written and published in the 40's and the 50's), although this fact worked very well for me as I read along. Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, of which I have read the well-known English version, is the beautifully written and uplifting memoir of a truly amazing woman who lived her Christian faith to the fullest as she saved numerous Jews who otherwise would have perished in the Holocaust.

The remaining two books are also memoirs. *The Occupied Garden*: *A Family Memoir of War-Torn Holland*. the story of Gerrit and Cor den Hartog and their young children in Nazi-occupied The Netherlands; in fact, it is carried as far as the family's immigration to Canada some years later. It is exceptional that this family story, which was written by two granddaughters of Cor and Gerrit, comes with a unusual amount of context about socio-political conditions in wartime Holland; this was a major reason why the book received very positive reviews when it was published in 2008. I agree that the book is "beautifully written," and that that these lives "hum with authenticity." However, I do think that the detail bestowed on the royal family, especially on Queen Wilhelmina (including her dowdy way of dressing), is excessive. Also, the abundant use of Dutch words, which could be perfectly well and accurately translated, struck me as a bit too much of this striving for authenticity; it becomes, I'd say, a literary mannerism. *A Boy in War,* written by Jan de Groot—who also immigrated to Canada—and based on his boyhood memories, impressed me as being just right with writing that is unadorned and compelling both.

May 27

I enjoyed *Engelandvaarders* so much that I decided also to go back to Norel's *Varen en Vechten*, which –while it has of course fictional characters—tells the story of the Dutch navy and merchant marine during the war years. Then I will turn to *Four Years till Tomorrow: Despair and Hope in the Wartime Dutch Indies*, an edited book which contains 26 first-hand accounts of those who, as children of civilians of Dutch nationality, were interned with their parents in Japanese prison camps in the then Netherlands East Indies, the children—with the exception of the older boys who were imprisoned with their father—being interned with their mothers. It was only decades later after these terribly traumatic years that these children, now adults, were encouraged to speak up. De Nederlandse Courant, now distributed with De Krant, to which I subscribe, has been carrying some of these stories which naturally caught my attention. While I have had this book for quite some time now in my library, this will be the first time I will give it a thorough reading. So I will have plenty of reading for the coming weekend.

May 30

Heard on the news yesterday that a mass grave containing the remains of more than 200 children was discovered on the site of what used to be a Catholic Church-run (!) residential school near Kamloops, B.C. A report has it that a simitar mass grave with the remains of more than 30 children has been found in Saskatchewan; others across Canada will probably also crop up. Horrifying and outrageous: just like in the Third Reich, but even there the Catholic Church did not run any concentration camps.

Thanks to HBO, I was able to watch the movie *Oslo* last night. Knew about it but never had a chance to watch it earlier—I don't think it had a significant commercial run even before the pandemic started. Certainly an amazing and uplifting story of how a Norwegian couple well connected to the Norwegian government—but not acting specifically on the latter's behalf—was able to start and "facilitate"—their word—the for a long time the secret back channel dialogues which constituted for a long time the unofficial negotiations between the PLO and the Israeli government, a painstaking and suspenseful process which finally led to the so-called Oslo Accord of September 1993. All the sadder, therefore, as was acknowledged in the movie's postscript, that the negotiations of 2000-2001 to finalize a comprehensive peace treaty broke down with Yasser Arafat at the last moment walking away from them (the last a signal fact that was not mentioned). And now, twenty years later, peace seems farther away than ever before and the Palestinians are worse off even though they have a legitimate—though largely powerless—government on the West Bank.

June 1

I read only some of the first-hand account stories in *Four Years Till Tomorrow*, for they were too distressingly alike in their memories of women's and children's suffering under the brutal Japanese prison guards and authorities. It was fortunate, though, that I was heartened by the stories of the courage of many of the woman especially the mothers, who did their fierce best to protect their children from abuse and starvation.

It was good to get back to *Varen en Vechten*, which I must have read for the first time when I was in my early 20's. It is a novel, of course, with largely fictitious persons but its story of the services rendered by the Dutch navy and merchant marine to the Allied cause in WWII has the ring of absolute authenticity. I am pleased by the major part played by the Dutch East Indies in this story; I don't think there is much awareness anymore of these events in The Netherlands of today. The courage and determination shown by crews in fierce sea battles is almost beyond imagination. The stress these men were constantly subjected to exacted its toll and the relief that many men sought on land in alcohol and sex and, paradoxically, even in fighting was ephemeral and illusory; the Christian perspective the narrator imparts to the story as well as the deep faith exhibited by some of the characters in their extreme trials show the only way out. With all its Dutch words and terminology pertaining to navigation, the technology of the ships and their equipment, and above all, to sea warfare, I had to consult my Dutch dictionary many a time, and so my Dutch vocabulary has nicely expanded.

June 3

Just finished reading Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. This is the definitive edition published in the 90's. The earlier edition which I read in the 60's —some time after I had seen the 1959 movie, which, as I remember keenly, had greatly moved me, even to tears at the ending. Some passages which Otto Frank, Anne's father, who survived the Holocaust, thought unsuitable, especially those in which Anne had reflected on sex and her own sexual feelings were now included. Some day I would like to obtain a copy of the original Dutch text, although the translation strikes me as excellent.

What a magnificent girl, a young woman really I would say by the time she reached the age of 15 on June 13, 1944, Anne was, for by then she had reached a wisdom beyond her years. A complex human being she was, highly intelligent and always eager for learning, courageous, idealistic—never losing sight of her ideals in her diary—and her teenage extraversion only a mask for a profoundly thoughtful introversion. Her diary, having been read now by tens of millions, made into a drama and twice—as far as I know—into a movie, has endowed her with the worldwide acclaim reaching far beyond the fame as a writer she dreamed of attaining some day. But her being finally swept up in the horrors of the Holocaust, finally dying, only a few months before the liberation, of typhus along with her sister Margot and thousands of others in the hell that was Belsen-Belsen is so hard to come to terms with. Where was God?—as so many Jewish and non-Jewish have asked. I must believe that, in the final analysis, God did not abandon Anne and the millions of others, that he was somehow with them until the very end, and took all of them to himself, into their eternal home.

Postscript: Anne Frank's diary shows that by the end of 1942 it was common knowledge in the Netherlands that the Jews being transported to eastern Europe, mainly Poland, were headed not to resettlement but to their deaths; there was already talk of the gas chambers.

2nd Postscript: Now that I have come to an end of my journal entries on the Netherlands in WWII I should also mention the timely series of small books on this subject, including the persecution of the Jews, brought out by the publishers of Dutch and De Krant. I am very glad to have these in my library; any Canadian of Dutch background should have them.

June 5

I am going back now to my survey of the short story in Canadian literature, I started in April and having already covered how it fared in the hands of Callaghan, Findley, Gallant, Laurence, Munro, and Wiebe, I am continuing with Margaret Atwood's no less than seven collections; for some of the stories there it will probably be a second reading. I don't intend to read everything but given her large output I will inevitably read a lot more of her than of the others. I want my survey to be based on a fairly representative selection from each of the authors, and so—except for one story by Laurence, "The Rain Child," already read by me—I will not turn to the anthology edited by Michael Ondaatje. When I have finished with Atwood's stories, I will attempt a summary evaluation of what I think was achieved with the short story form by each of the seven writers; I trust the short typology I came up with at the beginning of my survey will still be useful.

June 7

I should have remembered that two of the seven collections of Atwood's short stories are not really short stories at all. I bought them in the 2000's, did read some of their contents, but later on mistakenly mentally filed these two collections, *Good Bones* and *The Tent*, under the rubric of short stories. What they actually offer to the reader are what I'd call mini-fictions in which the author has chosen personas who indulge, especially in *Good Bones*, their wildest imaginations not excluding the truly bizarre, all of this laced with dark humour, parody, and mockery of self, others, and society and the *Zeitgeist* at large, even imbuing the sacrosanct with this devil-may-care spirit. For me, in *Good Bones* outstanding examples are "Gertrude Talks Back," "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women," "The Female Body," "Making A Man," "Hardball," and "Poppies: Three Variations." The contents of *The Tent* are a bit tamer.

June 8-9

After I finished *Good Bones* and *The Tent* yesterday, I had two of Atwood's short story collections left and later in the day I read *Moral Disorder*, the first of the three, in its entirety. It is actually a series of interconnected stories—as the reader is told by the text on the front flap of the dust cover—and this certainly would have created a special challenge to the author. For example, the first chapter, "Bad News" (each of the chapters is named as you would expect rom a series of short stories), has a first person narrator, Nell—her first name is not revealed until much later--the husband of Tig, who, like Nell, is a major character; both Nell and Tig are obviously seniors but not as yet extremely old. Nell continues to be the first person narrator in the following four chapters, but from her perspective as a child, teenager (in high school), and young woman; the story takes us back to the 1940's, ending in the 50's when Nell is teaching in Vancouver. The next four chapters cover her relationship with and eventual marriage to Tig; they move to and live on two farms in succession but eventually move back to the city; this probably takes up at least a decade, and the story is told now by a third person narrator, who, however, clearly embodies Nell's perspective. The final two chapters are told by a daughter of Nell and Tig; the latter are extremely old now and when the final chapter begins Tig has passed away, and the daughter is now left with her elderly, infirm mother, who, the reader is bound to assume, is not far away from death. The daughter, who is the first person narrator of these two chapters but is not named, reconstructs the earlier part of her mother's life—until 1955--from an album of

family photos each of which is marked by her mother: her mother was born in 1909, attended university in the 1930's and was married (to Tig?) in 1936.

The contradictions are patent, but have I missed or misread something? I am going to google for more info in the hope of clearing this up.

Yes, Wikipedia has cleared it up for me. The first person narrator of the final chapter is the author herself, not Nell, and the details about the mother (born in 1909 etc.) and father are those of her own parents. But how is a reader not familiar with Atwood's family background to know? I myself did know that Atwood had a strong Nova Scotian family connection, and that rang faintly at the back of my mind as I read this chapter but the abrupt jump from Nell to the author herself simply escaped me.

Aside from this criticism of mine, "Moral Disorder" worked well for me. As I read it, I thought it had something of the spirit of a very good short story by Alice Munro, such as "Love of a Good Woman" and "Passion,"

June 11

I have finished reading the last of Atwood's short story collections, *Stone Mattress*, published in 2014. Here the author indulges her capacity for vivid imagination to a degree unparalleled in her earlier collections and ventures *tout court* into the realms of the fantastic, the macabre, and the criminal, and not to forget, a reckless vulgarity of language, including the profusion of well-known four letter-words such as spouted by the devil-may-care third person narrator of "The Dead Hand Loves You," as he immerses himself (herself?) into the milieu of excess of a foursome of would-be beatniks in the Toronto of the early 60's. There is a lot of black humour, so iconic of Atwood's style and manner, throughout the collection: above all, I think, in "Torch the Dusties," where the satiric target are the seniors in an institution for the elderly upon which the anomie of the world at large is descending with horrific force, and I could not help but be reminded of Juvenal's merciless pillorying of the ravages of old age in one of his satires.

Looking back at the seven authors of short stories I have been reading, for the first or the second time, starting in April, I place without any hesitation Atwood, Laurence, and Munro in the first rank. The stories of each of these possesses its own distinct qualities. Atwood's imagination in telling her stories ranges the farthest in theme and tone, as is especially obvious from her Stone *Mattress*. In her capturing of her stories' characters—in both their inner and outer aspects—such is her penchant for satire and black humour that there is less heart, as I would put it, than in Laurence and Munro. The latter has been praised for her avoidance of sentimentality, but there is certainly a profound quality of empathy in her portrayal of character, and it reaches out even to the less likeable personages. Empathy, in the depictions of even the minutest aspects of her stories' characters there is also plenty of, even more so I'd say, in Laurence.

At the beginning of my survey of the Canadian short story and the prominent role it has played in the building of Canadian literature over the last century, I distinguished three types: the climactic story, where the story-line moves to a distinctly perceived resolution, whether a happy one or not; the situational story in which the portrayal of the milieu in which the story's characters move receives a tangible presence of its own; and finally the sketch, in which the story-line is very

simple or even non-existent, and a brief although vivid sketch of character and / or milieu is the story's substance. Laurence, Munro, and Atwood blend these two types in just about all of the stories I've read. The other four authors, whom I rank in second place, are different. With his stories set in Canada and the U.S. of the 20's to the 40's—perhaps a little beyond these as far as I can determine from my reading—Callaghan leans more to the situational short story, as I already noted earlier. So does Gallant with her stories set in the Europe, especially Paris and France, and in the Quebec of many decades ago. In the short stories of Wiebe, set in the Prairie Provinces and in the Canadian North and traversing at least a century in time, the climactic and situational possibilities are blended; nevertheless, the stories have a different 'feel' to them than those of Laurence,, Munro, and Atwood. The same is true of Findley's short stories collected in *Dinner along the Amazon*. I have already praised some of the stories there back in April, and for this reason, I place him very close to the 'big three,' not surprisingly so given his stature as one of Canada's greatest novelists.

June 12

Last night at Glenn's place I watched, for the first time in its entirety, the 1981 movie, *Outlander*. I am very picky with science fiction movies—also novels for that matter—but this film successfully combined believable science fiction with suspenseful action, the setting being a large-scale mining operation on the moon Io of the planet Jupiter, and the time-line probably the 22nd century. The sets were most impressive, sometimes with the giant Jupiter glowing red in the background, and the cinematography awesome, all this accomplished without the computer-generated special effects which one now expects in movies of the past two or three decades. Sean Connery, the central character, gives an uncharacteristically—for him—emotive performance. I rate this one of the very best science fiction movies I have watched since Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece of already many decades ago.

June 15

I recently read a review of a study of Homer's *Odyssey* which made a very good case that revenge / retribution is a dominant motif in the epic culminating in Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors who had been pressing themselves on Penelope during his many years of absence and, even worse to our modern sensibilities, his hanging of the maids who had slept with these men. This took me back to Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, which I have in my library but which thus far had given only a cursory reading. Not surprisingly, Atwood recasts the story of Odysseus's revenge and indeed much of the whole epic's story from Penelope's perspective, a woman's perspective, framing them with the lamentations of the spirits of the murdered maids. I cannot honestly say that I endorse Atwood's style and manner of her recasting. It strikes me too much of a *jeu d'esprit* full of the mischievous fantasy and dark humour for which Atwood has a strong penchant and even descends to the sheer ridiculous such as when she has Penelope believe her mother was a sea-nymph and her father tried to drown her shortly after her birth. I would have liked a little more of the seriousness which I find in the beautifully conceived and written historical novels set in Greek and Roman antiquity of Mary Renault and Colleen McCullough.

Over the past two days I have also read Margaret Laurence's *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* and am now finishing my reading of James King's biography. These two have only added to my admiration for this great Canadian author, one of the outstanding of the past century. Laurence

emerges from King's lengthy and superbly researched biography as a more flawed person, but nothing to detract in my eyes from the essential nobility of her character and her unique stature in Canadian literature.

June 16

The strangest dreams last night. A Belgian fisherman got a splendid big new boat from the King of the Belgians so that he could cast his nets well outside the fishing grounds of the North Sea and English Channel contested by fishermen//women from too many nations. Scott and I were walking in Zwolle to the Filosofenallee where my great-grandfather Christiaan Verstraete (who died in 1952 at the age of 86 and of whom I still have a faint recollection) lived in order to present him with a gift, but we never found him. (This may tie in with dreams I've been having for a quite a while about visiting my Opa and Oma, who, well into their second century now but still pretty hail and hearty and still living—in a small apartment now—in Zwolle.) Later we were walking to the Abel Tasmanstraat, where my family and I had had our last home in Holland. I don't recall if we ever got there, but on the way we encountered a strange-looking creature, sort of looking like a corgi but with a white pelt and very tiny paws. Scott tried to poke him, but I don't remember what happened next.

June 18

In his introduction to Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, Claude Bissell briefly brought out Frederick Philip Grove and his Prairie novels with their "craggy" Abraham Lincolnesque characters and thus aroused my curiosity. I also learned from an online source that Grove should be considered and valued as the author who brought realism into the Canadian novel, which prior to him—with only one notable exception I would note, namely Sara Jeanette Duncan's 1904 novel, *The Imperialist*—had been of the romance and adventure type with little or no authentically Canadian focus. Grove can be paired with Morley Callaghan in this respect, although the latter's first novel was not published until 1928, while Grove's output started in the early 20's. I therefore bought a little while ago a copy of Grove's most commercially successful novel, *In Search of America*, published in 1927. I have the fourth edition published in 1939 by the Ryerson Press. It is in pristine condition with the handsome original dust cover.

This is the story of Philip Branden, a young man from a Swedish upper middle class family who immigrates to the United States and Canada in the early 20th century—somewhere, as I gather from certain details in the novel, in the middle years of the first decade. In his Note to the fourth edition, the author speaks of an autobiographical element in his novel but emphasizes that one should not expect factual exactitude (for example, Grove was of German birth, his German name being Felix Paul Berthold Friedrich Greve): what is fundamentally important is what might be called the spirit undergirding and driving the story. Essentially, I'd call this novel a *Bildungsroman*, although th real *Bildung* here starts with the 23 years old Branden's immigration. Prior to this, he had enjoyed a life of *otium cum dignitate*—the phrase used by the narrator, Branden, himself—" leisure with class," as I'd translate it. This life comes an end when his father's much reduced finances can no longer support it, thus prompting Branden's decision to immigrate.

Branden relates his years of struggle to establish himself, for a long time in the U.S, but finally deciding to settle in Canada in a narrative which is not only characterized by verve and colour, thus giving the reader a vivid picture what life was like, especially in the U.S., at the beginning of the last century but, equally important, by the protagonists' s continual reflection on the overarching values which shape a society, and this reaches its culmination towards the end as he comes to the realization that the United States does not at live up to the Lincolnesque ideal of government of the people, by the people, and for the people; his own principles now are pretty well—using my own terminology—those of a social democrat.

Once the Acadia Library resumes its normal operations within the next few months I must read more of Grove's novels, as many as I can get hold of, while at the same time also doing more reading of Morley Callaghan. With this project I am bound to add substantially to my understanding and appreciation of how, thanks to a long succession of many gifted writers, the Canadian novel, the supreme literary form also of our country, now offers a feast of story telling which covers such a wide and diverse spectrum of lived experience.

June 20

Have watched so far three matches in the first round of the Euro Cup. I found two of them, Ukraine versus the Netherlands and Portugal versus Germany, genuinely exciting and thoroughly enjoyed them. I also took a liking to the amply displayed camaraderie among the players, However, unlike Chris, I am not a connoisseur of the sport and will probably continue to watch only a small selection of the remaining games. The fact that in many countries soccer or football, to use the name used in almost all countries, is almost a religion coming for many with the requisite fanaticism is baffling to me, but I guess people must have something in their lives they can be unconditionally worshipful about. I remember that as a kid in Holland we were kept away from the games because many of them were played on Sunday: keep the Sabbath holy! However, there was always the radio. I remember an Austria-Holland match which was narrowly lost by the Dutch because, as they saw it, of an unfair ruling by a biased umpire, and the country went into an orgy of mourning and anger —I still remember vividly the bold headline on the front page of the Zwolsche Courant my family subscribed to. All that being said, I still far prefer soccer to American and Canadian football—especially the former with its annual riled-up theatrical stupidity of the Superbowl.

June 22

Sometime ago already I bought Michelle Obama's *Becoming* and Barack Obama's *A Promised Land*. I read a bit in what looks like being the first volume of Barack's presidential memoirs and just glanced through Michelle's memoir, but now I am reading more slowly and thoroughly. I have finished Michelle's book, which is her memoir of her life from childhood onwards. It most certainly deserves the wide acclaim it has received. I could make a long list of all the laudatory phrases, but I'll just bring up three: extraordinarily frank, intensely thoughtful, as well as beautifully written. With regard to the first two, I am impressed by the great personal challenges Michelle faced and ultimately overcame, in her own creative and unique ways, as she became immersed in, and was at times overwhelmed by, the life of politics, above all presidential politics during the long, stressful months of the 2008 primaries and the subsequent presidential

campaigning when she was "demonized" by the conservative media "as an angry black woman who didn't like her country." Her memoir is bound to become a classic.

June 26

Just finished reading, *A Promised Land*, a hefty book of well over 700 pages and the first of the two volumes which are to become Barack Obama's presidential memoirs. *A Promised Land* covers the story as far as May 2011, when on the 4th day, in an exquisitely planned and executed strike, a SEALS team killed Osama bin Laden hiding out in his secret compound inside Pakistan; this much needed and deserved kudos for Obama's presidency happened six months after the Democrats had lost badly in the House of Representatives in the 2010 mid-terms.

Superbly comprehensive, intensely thoughtful and affording the reader an extraordinary entry into the author's heart and mind, at times even into their most private recesses, it has left me with the feeling that this is a memoir like no other political memoir I have ever read; only Harry Truman's two-volume memoir of his presidency, which I am fortunate to have in my library and read many years ago— I must give this a second reading as a top priority—approaches it in excellence. I can only imagine how invaluable it will be to future historians of the Obama presidency.

From now on, at least for a considerable while, my reading project will become far more eclectic and take on both fiction and non=fiction. I will go back to the Canadian novel but concentrate on more recent works which have read before but of which a second reading will provide me with new enjoyment and insight and will interleave this with the reading of non-fiction which I have never read or, more often, done so only cursorily; poetry will probably also come up.

June 27

Watched earlier today for the first time the 1943 Hitchcock-directed movie, *Shadow of a Doubt*. One of his best movies, in my opinion, a great psychological thriller featuring a serial killer on the run (Joseph Cotton plays this role phenomenally well) eventually suspected by his favourite niece, an unfolding romance between the latter and a detective, a near-finale scene on a train that would not be out of place in a James Bond thriller, a good dollop of black humour, and all this in a perfectly Americana-saturated middle-class setting in a 1940's California town.

June 29

Glad that TCM marked Pride Month last night with several right-on-target documentaries. I had watched *The Celluloid Closet* not too long after its release in 1995 and now 26 years later found it even more vivid and insightful. The other documentary I watched. *The Names Project, The AIDS Memorial Quilt*, released in 1989, was new to me, and I found its final part with its sight of the giant Quilt composed of thousands of commemorative panels as it was slowly unrolled so as to occupy many acres on the Washington D.C. Commons beautifully haunting and surreal, the sense of religious awe heightened by the vista of the multitude of persons, the survivors of the dead, slowly walking the Quilt with almost ritualistic deliberation: the Commons had been transformed into a grand field of both mourning and affirmation.

July 1

Now that I have gone back to Harry Truman's presidential memoirs I have to say that they more than equal Obama's *A Promised Land* in their overall impact . Their prose may be resolutely straightforward and workmanlike and not as emotionally resonant as Obama's, but their more than 1200 pages in total vividly bring home to me his historical, indeed world-historical achievements as president, as impressive, I don't hesitate to say, as those of his great predecessor Franklin Roosevelt. I combined my rereading of these with a fresh reading of Merle Miller's *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biograph of Harry S. Truman*, which I have also had in my library for decades. Miller's taped interviews of Truman and those who knew him, some from his earliest days as a boy and young man in Independence, Missouri, foreground Truman's absolute solidity and integrity of character, which, coupled with his straightforward manner and his complete lack of pomposity and egotism, endured undiminished into the years of his retirement. One might say Truman was the consummate *homo Americanus* raising himself to greatness.

It is gratifying to read that the boy Harry, considered a sissy by his schoolmates because he had to wear strongly corrective eyeglasses from the age of six onwards and therefore could not participate in their sporty and rowdy activities, overcame what in any other boy might have severely damaged his self-esteem by becoming a voracious reader and remained this way for the rest of his life, thereby becoming, together with Thomas Jefferson, one of the two best read U.S. presidents. His high teacher, Mrs Palmer, played a crucial role in instilling in him a special love of the Greek and Latin classics—he became quire proficient in Latin in fact—and was especially drawn to Cicero's political treatises, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, from which he derived much insight and wisdom capable of guiding even a 20th century politician and statesman'

July 2

It's been a sorry Canada Day: the village of Lytton in B.C., which had just suffered a record heat wave, burned to the ground, with loss of life, by a sudden wildfire coming out of nowhere; churches vandalized in Winnipeg and elsewhere, and in Winnipeg statues—of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth no less—toppled. This is not legitimate protest but sheer hooliganism. The First Nations cause will be damaged by this even though I doubt many of the vandals were actually indigenous people.

I am turning now to the Canadian novel again, concentrating now mainly on fairly recent publications, say, within the last 25-30 years, all in my library, leaving out only those I have already read within the last few years. For most it will be a second reading, which is likely to be even more rewarding than the first. I am starting with authors from the Atlantic Provinces; Alistair MacLeod and Ann-Marie MacDonald are coming first.

July 6

Further to what I wrote in my previous entry: It was heartening to see on television the people of a nearby First Nation community, with generous gifts of food and clothing and all sorts of other things, coming to the aid of the residents of Lytton driven from their homes and villages by a ferocious, all-consuming wildfire. It shows that, despite a grim past of subjugation and

degradation inflicted by white settlers and authorities on the indigenous, the two sides—indigenous and non-indigenous—can come together in a spirit of reconciliation, co-operation, and friendship.

Have finished reading MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* and MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*. The former is MacLeod's only novel and I had never read it before—only a collection of his short stories. His novel,which tells the story of interlinked MacDonald individuals and families in the clann Chalum Ruaidh, and is set on Cape Breton Island but also took me to Toronto and Calgary and, above all, to a uranium mine in northern Ontario, is a masterpiece of social and psychological realism and of superlative descriptive power; it deserves all the acclaim it has received.

MacDonald's novel—which I had not read previously—is, like MacLeod's, set in Cape Breton but also, in the persons of Kathleen and Lily, takes the reader to the New York of the late 1910's and into the world there of opera, jazz, the blues, and interracial nightclubs, but it comes in the mode of magic realism already encountered by me in Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie and Timothy Findley. This novel, too, has received wide acclaim, and I have to credit the author with passage after passage of vivid writing of amazing psychological immediacy. However, for me she pushes the envelope of magical realism at times much too far into the sheer fantastic. One scene in particular—of Materia, the mother, performing a gruesomely improvised Caesarian section as she cuts open the abdomen of her daughter Kathleen, who is about to give a sure to be fatal breech birth of a twin girl and boy, is utter *grand guignol*. As I recall,, MacDonald's *opus magnum*, *The Way the Crow Flies*, which I read about 15 years ago, stayed clear of this, and so I am looking forward now to a second reading.

July 8

Strange! I found last year's summer much more cheerful even though the anti-Covid-19 vaccines were then still a very distant prospect. However, in Nova Scotia the first wave of the pandemic had eased off almost to nothing a year ago, and the two or three of us—Chris, Glenn, and myself—were able to take in some great outings all over the province. Now a year later the vaccinations are well under way—and it looks like that by the end of August at least 80% of Canada's eligible population will have been fully vaccinated and thus by the early fall things will be almost back to normal. However, this summer there seems to be more anxiety and melancholy at the back of my mind. Is it because there is still uncertainty, at least in my opinion, about the final outcome? Could the pandemic surge back again because of new and far more transmissible and deadlier variants (such as the now spreading delta-variant)? Will travel across Canada and to other countries be hedged about by new restrictions? Will this pandemic not fizzle out within less than two years, as did the so-called Spanish flu of 1918-19? The grim happenings—fierce heat waves, drought, out of control wildfires, the dreadful discoveries at the sites of many residential schools, and the resulting social unrest—in many parts are not helping either. I am of course, as always, over-anticipating, but I hope I am doing my best to wean myself away from it.

July 10

Have just finished *The Way the Crow Flies*. When I read it shortly after its publication in 2003, most of my interest and attention were focused on the author's fictional adaptation of the harrowing story of a 1959 murder case set in a southern Ontario small town, the story of how the 15-year old Stephen Truscott was charged with and convicted of the murder of a young girl on the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence, a story that is ingeniously interwoven with much of the novel's narrative right up until the end when Madeleine McCarthy, who has become the story's central protagonist, arrives in her mind at the shocking truth; in this and in the novel as a whole, the story raises a whole complex of fundamental questions of moral responsibility while also pointing to eventual redemption.. Now many years later I have appreciated the novel's epic sweep taking in both the individual family and the society and culture at large, one that evoked for me at the beginning the Canada of the early 1960's caught in the excitement of the space race coupled with the menace of the Cold War—indeed at one point on the precipice of a doomsday nuclear war—but at the same time climbing to heights of prosperity undreamt before, and then finally, about a quarter of a century later, despite the fading of the Cold War, finding itself challenged by an even greater malaise of angst and purposelessness; however, in all of this Madeleine, is finally reconciled with her mother Mimi, who until then had not been able to accept her lesbianism.

MacDonald's prose is manifoldly rich and sensuous, alive with irony and satire, and infused with an even greater measure of the psychological immediacy which already entranced me in her earlier great novel. In her acknowledgment at the back MacDonald expresses her special gratitude to Timothy Findley, and I myself recognize the great artistic and spiritual affinity between these two outstanding Canadian writers.

July 14

Thanks once more to HBO, I had a wonderful surprise last night as I was able to watch *At Eternity's Gate*, not a conventional biopic but a film intensely and beautifully focused on the final period of Vincent van Gogh's life, namely the months he spent in Arles in the south of France and which came for him with a dazzling sunburst of creativity. The movie bears comparison with *Lust for Life* of the mid-50's starring Kirk Douglas, but I found it even more compelling thanks to Willem Dafoe's absolutely stellar performance, a script which foregrounds van Gogh's devout Christianity and his unique artistic vision, and, last but not least, the superb, nuanced cinematography. Vincent's intensely loving relationship with his brother Theo is underlined even more than in *Lust for Life*: thus, at one point we see him reclining and at times sobbing on Theo's shoulder. The same is true of the fierceness of his friendship with the almost equally unconventional but far more 'stable' Paul Gauguin especially as this leads to a catastrophic meltdown when the other splits up with him. Equally well portrayed are the kind Genoux family which provides him with accommodation, the caringyoung doctor who questions and listens to van Gogh after the debacle with Gauguin, and recommends thar he spend some time in a humanely run asylum, and, later on, after van Gogh, has run away from the institution, the initially sceptical but eventually sympathetic and thoughtful priest who is called upon to counsel him. Finally, on the basis on a fairly recently and, in my opinion, quite convincing explanation, the movie has it that van Gogh does not take his own life—which would have been, for all his mental instability, completely contrary to his Christian principles—but is mortally wounded by a gunshot fired by a boy who did not intend to injure but only to frighten him;

earlier on, we have already seen a group of children—very much in the spirit of their elders—behaving hostile to the artist when they come upon him sitting behind his easel outdoors and totally absorbed in his painting. The final scene—of course quite imaginary—set in a large room with van Gogh laid out in his coffin in the centre and surrounded by multitude of his paintings which are carefully examined by a large number of solemn and respectable looking men is strikingly prophetic.

July 15

Have finished Ann-Marie MacDonald's third novel, *Adult Onset*, published in 2014, fairly recently therefore by my standard, and so, normally I wouldn't have it read for a second time at this point. However, my recollection of it was so hazy—a middle-aged lesbian woman raising two young children mainly by herself, her partner being on the road all over the country nearly all the time because of her career in the theatre, and driven half-crazy much of the time by this fact—that I felt I needed to give it a second reading especially after having found my second reading of *The Way the Crow Flies* so immensely rewarding.

Well, my basic assessment of the story hasn't changed dramatically. Mary Rose is indeed the consummate put-and-putting-upon early 21st century neurotic awash in turmoil in response to just about any upset, although the tenderer feelings have their due too. I cannot help but contrast her with my mother who had six children in succession over a seven-year period, my dad being on the road much of the time promoting the family business. I know it was not easy for my mom, but none of this constant emotional upheaval. Those years, apart from the last year of WWII, from the mid-1940\s to the early 50's, hardscrabble times though they were for the Dutch—of which years I have vivid memories from the age of four onwards— were relatively tranquil ones in daily life; none of the frenetic pace of the today's world—*O laus temporis antiqui*. My second reading, however, has made me more understanding of the traumas of Mary Rose's past which she still carries with her and repeatedly come back to her in flashbacks.

Stylistically, too, *Adult Onset* is, not surprisingly, brilliant. The prose speeds along in rush hour fashion. MacDonald uses the common story-telling device of the third-person narrator, but this continually morphs into vivid interior monologue and stream of consciousness which have taken meacross the full spectrum of Mary Rose's interioruty. Nicely spiked swaths of humour, irony, and satire are strewn about almost everywhere. For the sheer virtuosity of its narrative style and manner as much as for its psychological and social realism, this third in the author's magnificent triad of novels more than deserves the critical acclaim it has received.

July 17

Again, I owe a lot of thanks to HBO, this time for including the 2017 movie *The Death of Joseph Stalin* in its film portfolio, so that I was able to watch it earlier today, The reviews of a few years ago had already piqued my curiosity. Yes, the movie presents events and characters in the mode of black comedy, and initially in my watching I judged this detracted from the ultimate seriousness of this mighty turn in the history of the Soviet Union, but eventually I came around to the view that that black comedy did work here as an appropriate mode in which to situate the story, for it is good to be made to see that the collective leadership of the Central Committee which took power after Stalin's death consisted of unheroic, petty men and that even the titanic

tyrant himself had been, in the final analysis, such a person, much like his contemporary, Hitler. Stalin's lavish funeral was sumptuously portrayed, but black comedy had its moments even here, and I was fascinated by the twists and turns of conspiring and power jostling which enabled the men of the Central Committee finally to close ranks and turn upon and liquidate Beria (superbly played by the Simon Russell Beale.) Khrushchev, who emerges from the group as its sanest person and most committed reformer, is memorably portrayed—and, appropriately, with only light touches of humour and satire—by Steve Buscemi, whom I had known already well as an accomplished actor from some of his previous movies and, above all, from the television series *Boardwalk Empire*.

July 18

I have started on two more authors hailing from Nova Scotia two of whose novels I wanted to read for a second time. I have just finished John Tattrie's *Black Snow*. My friend June, whose student Jon had been, had encouraged me just after its publication in 2009 to read it, and I was more than glad I followed her advice. The central event in *Black Snow* is the horrific1917 Halifax explosion. As such, of course, it invites comparison with *Barometer Rising*, and indeed it holds up very well, largely because it is so different. It has a central protagonist, Tommy Joyce, who has fought for two years in the trenches of WWI and still carries that trauma with him. It is also a great and complex love story centred on him and Evie (Evelyn). The story is told in both first-person (Tommy, of course) and third-person narrative and in non-chronological fashion, a technique which in fact adds to the narrative's immediacy. The horrors of trench warfare are vividly brought back in Tommy's mind, although, in my opinion, in one episode to a non-credible excess, namely the episode in which Tommy finds himself, together with the corpse of a fellow soldier, trapped for a whole week in a shell-gouged and almost completely water-filled crater; too *grand guignol* for my taste. *Black Snow*, as a whole, however, is a remarkable achievement for Tattrie, whose non-fiction works I have also read;; I have *The Hermit of Africville* in my library.

July 21

On a cynical note first: Why are the media making such fuss about Jeff Bezos's and Richard Branson's ventures into space, to be followed now by others of the class of the superrich? Another species of conspicuous consumption and a sad parody of the flights made by bona fide astronauts, which have at least some scientific value.

On a much brighter note: For weeks already I have been entranced by the profusion of wild flowers in the field I cross in making the shortcut to the nearby shopping mall. This is so typical of Nova Scotia; I have not seen anything quite like it in other parts of Canada. The bright yellow of several different flowers dominates—and soon will be joined by the yellow of the goldenrod heralding the end of summer; the yellows are set off by the intricately figured white of the Queen Anne's lace. In my front yard every year I have wild rose bushes growing whose red blooms never fail to delight me, and everywhere in our province you will see growing wild the lupine, my favourite of all.

Of the three novels by Lesley Choyce I read previously and have in my library I decided to reread *Cold Clear Morning* and have just finished it, Mostly set in the fictional village of

Nickerson Harbour on the Eastern Shore, the author's own much beloved *patria*, the story is superbly told by the central protagonist, Taylor Colby. It is a deeply poignant family story with Taylor right at its centre. The prose succeeds in being both precise and evocative whether it is describing land-, ocean-, and skyscapes that imprint themselves on the mind or detailing Taylor's father's consummate craftsmanship in building an exquisitely beautiful 30-foot seafaring boat/

July 23

I have turned to two novelists from Newfoundland, Wayne Johnston and Michael Crummey, and I have just finished reading Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, for the second time since my first reading it in the early 2000's. My second time immersion in it has demonstrated once more how rewarding a second reading can be. The greatness of the novel, which I sensed already two decades ago, is now all the more firmly, indeed overwhelmingly, imprinted on my mind. All the superlatives the novel received upon its publication are in order. It is a brilliantly fictionalized biographical novel which has taken me through the colourful life and (eventually) the checkered political career of Joey Smallwood, who is the novel's principal narrator. As what you might call a rags to riches story, peopled by many vividly portrayed characters—including the completely fictional Sheilagh Fielding, which whom Smallwood has an intense love-hatred relationship from his boyhood onwards—it has a decidedly Dickensian flavour. But beyond Smallwood's story, the novel has enriched me with an unforgettable vista of Newfoundland, of the awesome, but also unforgiving wilderness grandeur of its lands and seas, and of the turbulent, often painful history of its people.

July 25

Late in July every year Jim Sacouman and Barb Moore invite their friends to celebrate with them Moncada, Cuba's national festival. The venue is their spacious home and its huge yard on the Minas Basin; here you will enjoy watching the incoming and outgoing tides and the distant vistas of Cape Blomidon and the north shore of the Basin. For me yesterday it was the first time in three years. I had missed the event in 2019 and last year of course there was the pandemic. The weather was perfect: a comfortable temperature of 22 at mid-afternoon and sunshine nearly all the time, and as the evening progressed a strikingly full, luminous moon. There was great food and drink. Four guys had brought their guitars with them, and in the course of the evening we were treated to hours of music and song: all pop and folk, the latter at times songs of social protest—very appropriate for a gathering of lefties.

July 27

Watched last night on tv Woodstock 99. Supposed to be a nostalgic, if more commercially smart reprise of the famed 1969 event. Held at an abandoned air force base near Rome, NY. A crowd of up to 400 thousand. Brutal July heat leading to countless cases of heat exhaustion and dehydration . A feast of rowdy young middle-class heterosexism fuelling lots of sexual exhibition on the part of thousands of bare-breasted young ladies often carried across and on top of the crowd in what was called "surfing." Water spouting from broken pipes mixing with excrement seeping from broken toilets, mud to wallow in. Final night: Anarchic revelry inspired especially by the nihilistic music and song of a "metallic" band, arson and looting—where were the so-

called security guards?—firefighters and state troopers now arriving on the scene. Altogether a telling showpiece of America on the cusp of the 21st century.

July 28-29

River Thieves, David Crummey's highly acclaimed debut novel already in its title foregrounds the Beothuk people of Newfoundland driven to total extinction in the early 19th century. This tragedy—so grimly unique n the history of Canada's indigenous peoples—overarches he novel's entire story. The Beothuk or Red Indians came into the conflict with Newfoundland's settlers as they were known to enter the settlements of the latter in order to take for themselves objects—in particular metal ones—of interest and value to them. They spent the short summer period on the northeast coast but retreated inland to spend the long and harsh winter—i.e. most of the year—setting up and continually moving their tiny camps along rivers and lakes—hence the appellation "river thieves." Their practice of what the whites regarded as thievery plain and simple led to many violent confrontations between the two sides over the years, in which the much better armed whites inevitably had the upper hand, slaughtering numerous Beothuk, men but even women and children. Disease such as smallpox and tuberculosis communicated from the whites to the Beothuk did the rest.

Six principal characters, five whites—father and son Peyton Senior and Peyton Junior, Buchan,, Reilly, and the woman Cassie— and one Beothuk woman named Mary, are directly drawn into this tragedy. The two Peytons take part in violent confrontations but the son is basically understanding and peace-loving, and both, together with their housekeeper Cassie, eventually protect and care for Mary, the survivor of a massacre. Buchan, a naval officer, is convinced that the Beothuk deserve the protection of the Crown and is charged by the governor to undertake an official investigation into the massacres that have taken place in the northeast of the province as the possible first step to a full-blown trial in St John's. Reilly, although he too has partaken of the violence, is basically a person of good will;; his wife is a Micmac and they have several children; we learn of his brutalized childhood back in England. Mary learns a bit of English but does not make a real adjustment to the ways of the white culture. The Peytons, together with Cassie, set out to return her to her family and people—who by this time are probably completely gone—but dies of what is likely tuberculosis and thus the entire Beothuk people have become extinct on the face of the earth. The narrator enters into the actions, words, and interior lives—with Mary, of course, only to the very limited extent possible—of all of these with clear-eyed empathy

My first reading of this novel was motivated mainly by my curiosity about what happened to the Beothuk; thanks to my second reading after many years, this literary masterpiece, with its rich sensuous prose, has imparted to me a vivid sense of what Newfoundland as a whole was like: in the early 19h century; the ubiquitous terrible poverty and the almost unimaginably primitive living conditions in colonial St John's with its recurring fires ravaging the town; and beyond St John's, the vast island with its rugged shoreline indented by numerous coves and inlets and sparsely marked by tiny settlements, and with its endless-stretching dark forests, its hulking rock masses, its wellnigh impassable swamps and barrens, and its glistening ranks of rivers and lakes, and most of all, with its long brutal almost arctic winters. The author is a life-long Newfoundlander obviously in possession of a remarkable learning regarding Newfoundland English as demonstrated by the uniquely Newfoundland provenance of many a word, such as

"tilt" for a hastily improvised hut serving as a temporary shelter or "stagehead" for an improvised landing site for boats.

July 31

Finished reading this morning David Adams Richards's 2000 novel, *Mercy Among the Children*. I remember being impressed when I first read it fairly soon after its publication, but my second reading has made me fully realize that it is is one of the greatest tragic novels I have ever read; I would compare it to Thomas Hardy's *Tess of d'Urbervilles*, and it also stands close to *River Thieves* in this respect. Like most of Richards's novels and short stories it is set in the region in northern New Brunswick which is dominated by the majestic Miramichi River which flows into the Bay de Chaleur, Here vast forests and barrens dominate much of the landscape; there is some agriculture but the fishery is more important, and the forestry sector towers over all. The towns, the villages, and the people here become, in the novel, the microcosm where the timeless issues of good and evil, guilt, retribution, and possible redemption are played out, the overarching question in all of this being "Where is God?" There is no clear answer. Reviewers quoted on the book's back cover say, "This novel is a testament to the endurance of the human spirit" and, "David Adams Richards' characters achieve redemption through affliction." True enough, but the story's closure brings with it very little joy

The family of Sydney and Elly Henderson and their children Lyle, Autumn, and Lyle, living in abject poverty, above all the parents, bears the burden of the contempt, slander, false accusations, and even violence inflicted on them by the community in which they.live. It is Lyle, the eldest of the children and the first person-narrator in nearly all the novel, who tells their story with "depth of feeling and fierce drive"---as another reviewer has rightly has it. Sydney and Elly are veritable Christian saints, of the sort you encounter in a Dostoyevsky novel—think of the *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*; Sydney is a self-educated scholar, an ardent lover of literature ancient and modern, from which he quotes and draws inexhaustibly—this of course makes him the supreme oddball in his community, while Elly stands out for his simple piety and, like her husband, for her utter devotion to her children. One might indeed say they live their sorely afflicted lives in the spirit of the Jesus' Beatitudes. At the end, the family is finally rehabilitated and received into honour, but by then Sydney, Elly, and Percy are dead. Autumn has become a highly respected teacher and author, but Lyle is a wanderer and hermit both. The mills of the gods have ground slowly and imperfectly.

August 2

It looks like I'll be turning more often to the Turner Classic Movies channel this month since it is featuring "Summer Under the Stars," which generally means a better selection of superior movies. Yesterday it was movies starring Bette Davis and today Richard Burton. Yesterday, I dipped into four Bette Davis movies (three of which I had seen before); she is certainly the *grande dame* of Hollywood film; her acting may be a bit too stagey—no Method acting for her—for today's tastes but it is always magnificently compelling. I watched one Burton movie, *The Comedians*, this afternoon (a first time for me); it is based on a novel by Graham Greene, set n Papa Doc Duvalier's Haiti,, and offers superb performances by several high-profile actors, so I watched it with full attention from the beginning to the end.it.

August 4

M.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind 1947*s is deservedly called a Canadian classic, and as such should bave been on the reading list one of my Wallaceburg Highschool classes; I suspect it was kept from us because of its at times very profane language and its talk and thinking about sexuality. As I was reading it I inevitably started to compare it to the great American classic of boyhood, *Huckleberry Finn*, and to the Dutch classic, *Bartje*. In my considered opinion, Mitchell's novel easily surpasses these, first oof all for its sustained and intense probing, in the life of the boy Brian McConnal,, of the fundamental issues of human life, and secondly, for the sheer descriptive power achieved by its word artistry. In both aspects, it simply soars. I bought the novel only very recently; it came in what you might call the coffee table book edition of 1976, containing the full text—the first edition which was published in the U.S had obviously received some pruning to remove offensive language and sentiments—and had illustrations of eight full-colour beautiful paintings and 32 black-and-white sketches by the well known artist William Kurelek, all in all a magnificent wedding of text and illustration.

I followed Brian's life in a middle class family from the age of four until his late pre-teens, from the late 1920's to the mid-Depression years in a small Saskatchewan town, which I got to know intimately. I followed his relationships with the members of his family, his father (who is the town 's pharmacist) and mother, his younger brother Bobbie, his maternal grandmother, and his father's younger brother, with his play-mates and with the strange asocial Young Ben, and, finally, with some of the elders of the community, including his teachers, who sometimes make a significant impact on him. Al the age of four, Brian has amusingly concrete notions about what God must be like; as he grows older these ideas become more abstract but at the same also more powerful, Twi elders, Mr Digby, the school principal, and Mr Palmer, the shoemaker, are the town's would-be philosophers—both have some good reading to their credit—and discuss, in their down-to-earth way, the fundamental questions of life and death, God, eternity, heaven and hell, body and mid, in Brian's presence; thus, too, Brian, who himself has been pondering these in his own way, grows and matures. However, it is Brian's father's death at the age of 40: towards the novel's end that is his starkest confrontation with the reality of death in the ongoing cycle of life and death.

The novel's descriptive power and word artistry are breathtaking, from the sweeping vistas of prairie and sky, of night and day, and of the coming and going of the seasons, down to the sensuous capturing of the smallest detail of a rain drop or snowflake or of an insect or any other being. I wonder if anyone has ever tried to translate *Who Has Seen the Wind*; it would have been a formidable, painstaking task even for the most capable translator.

August 6

I should add Mitchell's explanatory note just before the beginning of the story regarding the title of his novel:

Many interpreters of the Bible believe the wind to be symbolic of Godhood. In this way I have tried to present sympathetically the struggle of a boy to understand what still defeats mature and learned men-the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life. To him are revealed in moments of

fleeting vision the realities of birth, hunger, satiety. eternity, death. There are moments when an inquiring heart seeks finality, and the chain of darkness is broken,

This is the story of a boy and the wind.

August 7

I have decided to take a short break from the Canadian novel and turn back to the memoirs of American presidents I have in my library. I have commented on Barack Obama's and Harry Truman's and have just finished Richard Nixon's. I had read Nixon's very cursorily decades ago but now have given them a more careful reading and will formulate my comments within the next few days. Next come five more presidents: Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. When the Acadia University Library resumes it normal operations next month, I will try to find those of other presidents; I am particularly interested in those of Ulysses Grant. I am also keenly interested in those of Charles de Gaulle.

August 9-10

I read the *Memoirs of Richard Nixon* only cursorily after I bought the book decades ago. At that time I was of the opinion that he had abused his office so much that he deserved to be impeached and that he did the right thing by resigning; my reading of bis memoirs then did not change my mind. Now many years later, and having read the memoirs a second tome, and probably more carefully, my views are more charitable. Yes, Nixon and his henchmen did play dirty politics, but it seems to me now the whole Watergate affair was overblown by the media and a largely hostile Congress. Nixon should certainly have been censured by Congress, but nothing more. Nixon could certainly point to major achievements of his presidency, above all the breakthrough with communist China and the new détente with the Soviet Union as crystallized in the first Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty. Unfortunately, the Vietnam peace accord of 1973 only postponed the inevitable, although a major part of the blame here lies with the Democrat-dominated Congress which refused to finance any further American military intervention, While very critical of the misdirection, mismanagement, and sheer waste of many of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programmes. Nixon was not a right wing ideologue, as is demonstrated by his establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Nixon tells his story well, from the years of his childhood—I was moved by what he said about his mother ("my mother was a saint") in his farewell speech to the House staff—and as a young adult onwards to the presidency, up to moment of his departure by helicopter from the White House just after his resignation. I cannot but admire his intelligence and his capacity for hard work, which was fueled of course by his immense ambition. By far the greatest black mark he receives from me is an event which rates only a brief mention in his memoirs, namely the overthrow by the military—in which the CIA had a hand—of Chile's democratically elected President Allende in 1973. He does express in a few sentences his sharp disapproval of Allende's Marxist-inspired programme of socioeconomic reforms as being ruinous to the Chilean economy, but is silent on the fact that the dictator Pinochet oversaw a brutal regime of the arrest, torture, and execution of thousands of dissidents, whether real or suspected. However, laissez-faire capitalism was saved.

Many years ago I bought and read—the letter only very cursorily—Gerald Ford's *A Time to Heal*, but now with the help of a more through rereading of his memoir I can see his presidency from a much better perspective. It is indeed a full memoir that took me from his earliest childhood years all the way to the moment he and his wife left the White House for good in January 1977, having completed Nixon's second presidential term but having been defeated by Jimmy Carter in the 1976 election. With a presidency of less than 2 ½ years, it is not surprising that Ford's book is much shorter than Nixon's 1000+ pages. Ford strikes me as a decent, principled politician, at least as fiscally conservative as Nixon and somewhat more so on social issues, Despite its short duration, his term of office as president was most eventful: the wide criticism of his pardon of Nixon, the final Vietnam debacle in 1975, the energy crisis he inherited from Nixon leading to the worst economic downturn since the Second World War, and the Mayaguey incident, which at least proved the US could still flex its military muscle when needed, and finally, the 1975 Helsinki Accord between NATO and the Soviet Bloc.

I have the paperback edition, for which Ford wrote a new introduction devoted mainly to lambasting Carter's performance as president, especially for the latter's emphasis on the primacy of human rights in foreign policy, including in the U.S.'s relationships with its allies. Regretfully, Ford thinks the record of communist countries in human rights is so much worse than that of some of its allies that the latter should be left alone. It is a sentiment still common today in American right wing circles.

I have several books written by Jimmy Carter, but none of them covers his presidency, so I decided to reread his *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Childhood*, which I must have read so quickly years ago that it seemed virtually new to me. It was a good choice: Carter writes so beautifully and vividly of his years on the family farm near Plains, Georgia, in the 1920s and 30's that this book deserves to be called a classic. He writes of the farm work into which he was increasingly drawn by his father so that as a result by the time he was 16 he had a developed a remarkable set of skills mastering every conceivable task that comes with the intelligent ownership and operation of a large farm. The terrible poverty prevailing in rural Georgia especially during the Depression years stands out grimly. Equally foregrounded are his and his family's amazingly close relationships with their black tenant farmers and their families; his dad's fair and respectful dealing with them; his mother's devotion in word and deed to the welfare of these poverty stricken families; and his own pleasure in having a few of the black boys as his chums. We see already growing in the young Carter the sterling qualities of character and hands-on humanitarian for which he eventually he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

August 12

All this talk now about the vaccination passports which will be required for international travel, and so far we understand they will be electronic in that they will be uploaded on 1-phones Why wouldn't they be available in paper format just like our ordinary passports? An i-phone is a gadget that so far I have had no use for, and I hate the prospect of being forced to get one or myself.

August 14

In ten days or so I will have finished my reading of eight (American) presidential memoirs. Started with Obama a few months ago when the first of the two volumes had become available ago and right from the start I read him slowly and carefully. At that time I already had the memoirs of seven more presidents in my library, but—shame!—my reading of them had amounted to little more than a hasty turning of pages, and this much improved style of reading has markedly and positively affected my assessment of four presidents. I have already written that my assessment of Truman has risen even higher: he is truly one of the great American presidents. In Nixon's case, as I have already commented, the Watergate affair was hugely overblown; you can't really speak here of "high crimes and misdemeanors"; a censure by Congress would have been enough punishment. Carter's account of growing up in rural Georgia has added even more to my estimation of his character. And now I have just finished *Ronald Reagan: An American Life*, and as a result he is no longer, in my eyes at least, the dunce he is still held to be by many non-Americans. He acknowledges that he received continuous assistance—and names the person who worked with him—in composing the text of his memoir, but that hardly amounts to saying it had a ghostwriter. The memoir, therefore, is essentially his own work and as such it is an invaluable record of his life prior to and during the presidency. Thus, I found his account of his years as an actor illuminating and thoughtful. His inclusion of the crucial correspondence he conducted with Gorbachev, with him he achieved an especially personal relationship, add special lustre to his memoir..

I do take issue with his American exceptionalism subscribed to by so many of his countrymen. To say that the United States of America never launched expansionist wars or it used its power only as a force of good in the world is belied by the facts of history. He subscribes to a typically American libertarianism in his eulogy of capitalism as opposed to socialism especially in its worst manifestation as communism. Yes, government bureaucracy is always in danger of becoming dysfunctional but so is laissez-faire capitalism. Throughout in his memoir Reagan proclaims freedom as the supreme aspiration both for the individual and for the whole society, but this does not answer fundamental questions of right and wrong.

August 16

The Taliban have taken Kabul and it obvious now that while the personnel of the Canadian Embassy have been safely evacuated, the promises that the Canadian government regarding the thousands of Afghans whose lives will almost surely be in grave danger, have been empty ones. No evidence of any real planning and preparation. Maybe now other countries and their armed forces will be able to assist in the evaluation. But in the meantime, I fully agree with veterans who have spoken up: shame on the Canadian government! It may end up with having much blood on its hands. This should become a big issue in the election campaign.

August 17

I guess I should withdraw the remarks I made yesterday about the lack of Canada's preparedness to evacuate Afghans in dire need to flee their country. The news speaks of more than 800 Afghans already evacuated. The chaos at the Kabul Airport is over, and Canada is working together with the U.S,, U.K., and other allies in bringing in more planes, with so far, at least, no hindrance by the Taliban.

August 20

I have found the memoirs of two more American presidents in my library. I must have bought them many years ago but probably then contented myself with a quick glancing through and so it will be a pleasure now to go through them more slowly and carefully, They are Dwight Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe*, which of course he wrote before he became president in 1953, and Lyndon Baines Johnson's *The Vantage Point*, in which he covers his years as president, 1963-1969. So starting with Harry Truman and ending with Barack Obama, I have read ten memoirs, the only ones missing are John F; Kennedy's—for obvious reasons tragically—and George H. W. Bush's. I'd read the ones I still have to read inn order of George W. Bush, Eisenhower, and Johnson.

The situation is still not very good in Kabul, The Kabul Airport is under the control of the Americans and their allies and their planes are landing and taking off there regularly but access to the Airport for refugees, as opposed to persons with passports (Canadian, American etc.), is now blocked by the Taliban, and in addition there is also the plight of would-be refugees in other parts of Afghanistan. The allies must successfully negotiate an unimpeded access to the Airport and a much better overall assistance to those who fear the Taliban's retribution; otherwise the allies must resort to a much greater military intervention.

August 21

Finished Bill Clinton's *My Life* yesterday. It is a truly sprawling autobiography graced with fluent and vivid writing. When it came out, one critic called it a "rags to riches" story; somewhat of an exaggeration but not without an element of truth. First as governor of Arkansas and then as American president, he was a reformist in the best sense of the word, full of energy and initiative in working for social justice and for an economy which provided a decent standard of living for all American, none of the failed "trickle-down" economics of the Reagan years. On the world stage, too, he worked hard and persistently for peace and conflict resolution, and for the parameters of a global economy that would bring a measure of prosperity to everyone The Republican opposition, as they began to wage their newly found culture wars initiated by the religious right, did all it could to obstruct him, with unfortunately some success on the domestic front; Clinton's sexual peccadillos provided much for the grist for their battle against him. There was not much indignation, though, for his lamentable inaction in connection with the Rwandan genocide, which I regard as the one terrible black mark against him and his administration.

August 23

Thanks as usual to HBO, I watched a most compelling documentary, "In the Same Breath," last Saturday night. It is early spring in Wuhan, a city of 1.1 million in China. The strict quarantine and lockdown imposed on January 23, 2020 has been lifted and the city and indeed the whole of China are celebrating. In a large hall to the sound of rousing music pouring from loudspeakers hundreds of festively attired and impressively choreographed girls and boys and young women and men are singing their triumphal tribute to their beloved motherland and to their wise, beneficent government. Half a century earlier the attire would been unisex drab and each right hand would have clasped the familiar little red book written by the Great Helmsman himself. However, already weeks before the pandemic crisis came to an end courageous women and men

armed with smartphones were audio-videu-recording a very different story: overcrowded hospitals unable to growing numbers of the very sick, ambulances refusing to pick up the afflicted for this reason, the sick lying in a hospital's parking loot desperately hoping to be taken in, the dying in the hospitals and in their homes, and the grief of the bereaved, and the huge numbers urns of urns with the ashes of the dead brought to the ceremonies, at one of which an employee opined the actual number of the dead was much greater, perhaps even tenfold greater, than that officially reported at the end, which was just over 3800.

Afterwards, just about all survivors were cowed into showing praise or at least into keeping silent, but a few brave individuals did speak up and were not afraid to be recorded as such. The viewer learned some of these simply disappeared while others received prison sentences.

The documentary moved on to the U.S. Confusion galore. Was it just a flu, as Trump and others claimed at the beginning? What about masks? Even Anthony Fauci, for a while, didn't seem to ger it quite straight. State-ordered lockdowns were unacceptable, a grave violation of constitutionally guaranteed rights, to many with loud protest, and finding support in right-wing media. Amidst all this cacophony of conflicted views, the country slipped into a hugely growing rate of fatalities, well over twice the Canadian rate. To be fair to Trump, with his WarpSpeed initiative, he did set into motion the amazingly accelerated search for an effective vaccine.

The documentary confirmed for me that while that an unreflective, unqualified invocation of freedom can derail a country badly from its moral grounding, if I had to choose between the Chinese and American extremes, the former tending again—after the demise of Maoism decades ago—towards totalitarianism, and the latter for the mindless libertarianism of many of its citizens, I would firmly reject both and continue to vote for the *media via* of social democracy.

August 24

Thanks to Brian's prompting I watched last night, *Apocalypse*, *La Première Guerre Mondiale*, on channel 51—which I really should watching more often since it carries excellent programmes from France (although the commercials are directed to Francophone Canadians). I had watched episodes before but this time it was from the beginning to the end. Even more now I was overwhelmed by the horrors of WWI, above all the almost unimaginable suffering of the soldiers. Last night's episode moved from the middle of 1915 to the fearsome mega-battles of the following year on the West Front: Verdun and the.Somme. I like to imagine that if I had been a Brit or Canadian at that time I would have been a pacifist and conscientious objector and, like Bertrand Russell, willing to go to jail for my principles. "For King and Conntry!": how hollow and even grotesque that sounds to me. The War was a clash to the death among the great imperial powers. In terms of moral justification, Britain and her Empire including Canada stand out as the best and—unless we count the Armenian genocide by the Turkish government and military—Germany as the worst, but in the Peace Accord of Versailles it was unjust to make Germany shoulder all the blame.

August 26

I have just finished reading *Decision Points*, George H. Bush's memoir of his presidency and the key moments and developments in his life before it, and I must say it has been a pleasant

surprise. First of all, his style of writing is concise and to the point, and his memoir only takes up a number of key decisions made and initiatives started by him as president—in his Conclusion brief reference is made to some more—all this has made for a fairly compact book, less than half the length of Bill Clinton's *My Life*, in the reading of which, I must confess, I was sometimes deluged by the cascading of names and details

Bush's conversion to a thoroughly lived Christian faith years before became president fundamentally shaped the rest of his life, including most certainly his presidency. Some critics have been cynical about this, charging him with an ignorant fundamentalism, but I take the Bush seriously and regard his faith as authentic and positive, just as I view that of his predecessor.

Bush has been most heavily criticized for the 2003 Iraqi War, but if I had been in his position I am confident I would have made the same decision since, after all, there was good reason to believe at the time that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction at his disposal and would be prepared to use them—had he not turned to chemical warfare in the Iraqi-Iranian War and against the Kurds?

One of his finest initiatives was the massive African AIDS Relief he set into motion followed by a similar initiative combating malaria; they saved millions of lives, Africa had become dear to the hearts of Bush and his wife Laura. I also admire the formidable initiative in education, "No Child Left Behind."

Being assured and proud of my social democratic political values, I do not go along, of course, with Bush's typically American distrust of socialism, and so I regard as ridiculously off the mark his dismissal of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez's efforts to lift the many millions of the very poor in that country out of poverty as "phony populism."

George Bush must be very disturbed over what is happening now in Afghanistan.

August 29

Have just finished reading Dwight Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe*. I do not have his two-volume memoir in my library—will try to get it from the Acadia Library or The Odd Book Shop—but reading Eisenhower' account, published in 1948, of his years as the Supreme Commandeer of most of the Armed Forces of the Western Allies has given me a close insight into the vastly demanding and complex task he carried out so superbly that, thanks to his massive popularity, the Republicans chose him as their candidate in the presidential election of 1952, in which he sailed to easy victory and served as a two-term president.

One thing that struck me in particular about Eisenhower as a military commander was his deep and ongoing concern for the wellbeing of his soldiers in every phase of the war. It comes to a fore in a striking incident which also turns up in the 1970 movie *Patton*: there in a military hospital in North Africa George Patton slaps a shell-shocked soldier, lambasting him as a cowardly shirker; when Eisenhower got wind of this—the incident got wide publicity in the press—he severely reprimanded the general.

Eisenhower sheds good perspective on the tragically failed Battle of Arnhem—very timely for me since last night, with Glenn and Chris, I watched again the movie *A Bridge Too Far*, in my opinion the greatest WWII movie ever produced. He obviously regarded it as a setback, but its effect on the strategy and the outcome of the war was limited: it may have set back the liberation of that part of the Netherlands which lies north of the great rivers by half a year, but a victory for the Allies would most certainly not have guaranteed for them the end of the European War by Christmas.

September 1

As usual thanks to HBO, I was able to watch *Nomadland* two nights ago, the Oscar winning movie of earlier this year.. It features a stellar albeit low-key performance—in sharp contrast to the fiery part she played some years ago in *Three Billboards*— by Frances McDormand as Fern, the central character, who like many others she gets to meet and know, is "On the Road" in her trailer. She, like the others, is not taken up by a bohemian wanderlust in the spirit of Jack Kerouac's defining novel or the iconic 1969 movie *Easy Rider*, and like the others too she is a very ordinary person with no artistic or self-realization ambitions born of *Weltschmerz* in today's America. In its largely understated way, *Nomadland* celebrates the qualities of resilience, companionship, and empathy; therefore a good case can be made that it is a very appropriate film for our tumultuous and as such deserved its Oscar.

September 3-4

Have finished reading Lyndon Baines Johnson's *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency 1963-1969* and am pleasantly surprised how good this presidential memoir is. I would easily set it along Harry Truman's. With its thoughtful reflections on the nature of the president's power but also its constitutional limitations especially in relation to Congress, the complex structures workings of which he knew intimately, thanks to his decades in the House and the Senate,, and which he handled probably more brilliantly than any previous president, and its detailed, exemplarily documented account of the remarkable events, both good and bad, of Johnson's tumultuous, even epochal presidency, this memoir is a historian's dream.

First of all, there is the mountain of transformative bills on civil rights and other key social issues such as combating poverty, reform in education, well targeted consumer protection, and large-scale conservation measures he put forward —all towards his Great Society— and was able to get passed into law by Congress. Yes, there is still racism in American society, probably even of the systemic type, but it is undeniable that a lot of progress has been made over the past half century, and the crucial role played by Johnson is indisputable. There is also still a lot of poverty but it is considerably less than it used to be. I have travelled a great deal in the U.S. since the late 60's, much more, I am sure, than the average American, and I have observed closely, but over the past few decades I have seen very little that I'd call the poverty of sheer destitution, which hardly exists any more in any developed country—even the poor nowadays have, for instance, their digital gadgets.

But there is Vietnam, of course. It is undoubtedly the black mark on Johnson's presidency and led him not to reoffer in 1968. However, even if we leave geopolitical considerations aside, there is blame on both sides, the U.S. certainly but also the Vietcong and North Vietnam. How

the American armed forces could bring themselves to turning to chemical warfare, that is napalm and Agent Orange, killing and maiming, mostly civilians—and even stunting future generations— in the hundreds of thousands, is beyond me. Ho Chi Minh rightly brought this crime of war and against humanity up in a letter to Johnson. On the other, hand, the Vietcong and North Vietnam were also capable of terrible atrocities: already before the heavy militarization of the war, the Viet Cong would readily single out and kill in cold blood any person who, in their opinion, represented the cause of the South Vietnam government; far worse, in their Tet offensive of early 1968, the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong massacred thousands in and near the city of Hué.

I admire Johnson's decision not to run for re-election in 1968 especially since he almost certainly would have won a second full term since by the fall of that year the Americans were very close to a peace accord with North Vietnam. He had basically already made that decision months before he announced it on March 31st to the nation and the world, his reasoning being that an inevitably strenuous campaign would have seriously interfered with his striving for the settlement he was wishing for with increasing urgency. His health was obviously a major consideration but I also see here a deep moral conviction in the interest of peace.

Finally, coming back to the geopolitical considerations I earlier referred to which led the USA to wage an all-our war on the Vietcong and the North Vietnam, it is easy to single out the alleged domino effect; this would see the dreaded communist totalitarianism spread to all of southeast Asia if South Vietnam were allowed to go under. After the fall of Saigon, however, with the sole exception of the three-year genocidal hell the Khmer Rouge inflicted on Cambodia—and this almost certainly would not have come about if in 1970 under the Nixon presidency that hitherto neutral country had not been severely destabilized by massive American bombing—this did not happen: Vietnam is still communist but since the Clinton presidency it has enjoyed a good relationship with the USA and also is a major trading partner with the rest of the non-communist world.

September 7

There are a few presidential memoirs left which I don't have in my library; when I manage to ger hold of them I'll certainly cover them, but in the meantime my reading has become eclectic concentrating on Canadian and American novels or short prose fiction. I have quite a few novels especially by American authors which I have not read or only paged through fast, but from now on my reading will be slow and intensive, the only way of course to enjoy good literature. Over the past long weekend I have already finished two.

When I first bought it many years ago, probably at a used book sale, I thought that *Married to the Icepick Killer: A Poet in Hollywood* by Carol Muske-Dukes was a work of fiction, but instead it has turned out to be part memoir and part a series of thoughtful reflections on the culture-shapingr role poetry and the poet still plays in the contemporary USA, including Hollywood, the nation's supreme image- and celebrity-making venue. The author, a highly acclaimed poet who also teaches creative writing at the UCLA, writes prose combining the virtues of analytical precision and poetic expressiveness. I was greatly moved by her essay paying splendid tribute to her late husband, David Dukes, a gifted stage and film actor who died suddenly in 2000 at the age of 50.

Ragtime by E.L. Doctorow, which I also read for the first time, was somewhat of a disappointment. It was hailed in 1975, the year of its publication—I bought it years later as a used paperback—as a great novel that made the dawn of the 20th century in the USA come brilliantly alive. In its first half it made on me an impact very similar to that of a gigantic silent film, very fittingly of course, but then, for me at least, it began to morph into the wildly and weirdly fantastical, and that killed the illusion.

September 10

Watched the third elections debate last night and found it "messy"—as one commentator rightly called it—and therefore very unsatisfying with speakers constantly talking into one another. The one speaker who had class throughout was Annemie Paul, except the time she called Justin Trudeau "not a feminist." The second debate, in French with simultaneous translation provided, which in a way was a pity because it largely drowned out the voice of the speaker, was more helpful. The third debate at the beginning did present itself ridiculously with the announcement on the screen that translations in numerous language was available—Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin, Arabic etc. etc,—was this really necessary? Anyway, I would not be able to decide on the basis of any of these debates which party to vote for. I will vote NDP, hoping for another minority government

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September 13

I read Marge Piercy's *Gone to Soldiers* for the first time more than 30 years ago, some time after its publication in 1987. and I remember well how deeply impressed I was by it, and now having read it again after all these decades I am even more profoundly affected. It represents indeed a magnificent achievement, a great 20th century epic easily comparable to the 19th century's epic masterpiece, Leo Tolstoy s *War and Peace*; all the accolades Piercy received were supremely well deserved. In fact, I remember that after having read her novel for the first time I brought her and Tolstoy up in my course on epic poetry in Greco-Roman antiquity: I suggested that in the West the novel had succeeded epic as the form of literature, prose literature now of course, which had the most potential for attaining to the sweep and majesty of classical epic. I am not going to repeat or even sum up what was said in the accolades I just referred to: I just want to make three observations. First of all, *Gone to* Soldiers has impressed on me how rife the USA itself, and really tin he West as a whole, were with anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia; these were not unique to the "bad guys," above all of course Nazi Germany, which drove the racism and anti-Semitism to a demonic extreme. Secondly, I am impressed even more now with the candour and the positivity which inform the narrative of sexuality and also take in homoeroticism and same-sex relationships; thus, the growing romantic and committed pair-bonding of the two WASP flyers Bernice and Flo is invested with remarkable sensitivity and empathy on the part of the narrator. Finally, and this is a mild criticism, the novel comes too close to portraying all Germans as rabid Nazis who welcomed the persecution and even the extermination of the Jews; one is reminded of Norman Finkelstein's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. My reading almost a year ago of Viktor Klemperer's 1933-45 journal has provided me with a powerful corrective of this unjust generalization.

September 16

Joseph Kanon's *Alibi*, published in 2004, which I just finished this morning is one of the most memorable thriller novels I have ever read; the critics' praises are right on. Its storyline is intricate and fast-moving with many jolting twists and turns so that it demands a very close and attentive reading; a fast impressionistic reading-through just won't do. Its three principal characters, Adam Miller, Gianno Maglione, and Claudia Grassini are complex human beings whose actions, both present and past, presented me with conundrums of right and wrong which defy conventional notions of morality, and this continues until the very end. There is also a fascinating array of secondary characters whose words and actions often offer similar perplexities. The novel's setting is immediate post-WWII Venice, and the author's obviously intimate knowledge of the city makes Venice come alive in sensuous detail. With its glorious setting in combination with its fast-paced plot –including a heart-stopping boat race--and psychological impact, *Alibi* has all the ingredients for an exceptional movie.

September 19-20

The *Nature of Things* tv series featured last night a very timely documentary, "Screens vs Kids," of which I caught a good part, highlighting as it did the addictive power of smartphones on children, stunting their overall development, learning capacities and mental health, One woman interviewed said that for their reason she had banished them from her household, even for her own use. I have been seeing for years now their harmful, mesmerizing impact on adults everywhere, even many seniors having caught the infection. I see it everywhere, fingers gliding across the little screens and faces staring dully at what moves forwards and backwards right beneath their eyes. You rarely see people reading books or newspapers in public spaces now. I myself will continue to hold out against them, a cultural rebel of sorts therefore, just as I keep my distance from the toxic social media.

I read William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* many decades ago and now have just finished reading it for the second time, slowly and carefully, and its literary and emotional impact on me has been immense. I have watched the 2016 movie, *The Birth of a Nation*—the title an ironic echo of the notorious 1915 D.W. Griffith film—twice over the past few years; it tells roughly the same story of Nat Turner, the leader of the slave uprising in 1831 Virginia, but its undeniable visual power and the occasional stretches of riveting dialogue and speech-making do not match Styron's extraordinary powers of story-telling—the story as told by Nat— thanks to a narrative prose that is baroque in its sonority and sensuousness while at the same time it also catches the lowly patois of blacks and uneducated whites.

I must bring forward two storylines, one minor and the other a truly major one which in effect clinches the story's final closure as Nat is only minutes away from his execution. The first is homoerotic: as a young man Nat falls in love with the teenaged Willis. The two enjoy moments of sexual intimacy, right after which Nat, already an aspiring preacher, baptizes Willis; the relationship, however, is doomed as Willis is soon sold into slavery. The other is Nat's falling in love with a white young woman, Margaret Whitehead. In his mind he exalts her in all the loveliness of her character and physical beauty, but his eros is also powerfully bodily and sensual. She returns his love with one that is pure agapé such as we read about in the New Testament. Amidst the slaughter of many other whites he kills her brutally—the only person indeed he kills himself—but even in her death agony Margaret does not scream, just moaning softly, "It hurts so much." And finally, as his execution draws nigh, that love enfolds Nat.

September 21

The election's full results won't be known before all the mailed-in ballots have been counted, but it is already clear this election has changed nothing substantially, and we're in for another minority Liberal government. I am sorry that Annamie Paul did not get elected to represent a Toronto constituency in the House of Commons. She is a thoughtful, decent person not given to partisan grandstanding who came through very well in the campaign interviews and in two of the three party leaders' debates: if she had won she would be wielding a lot more *auctorita*s as the leader of her party; her leadership may be in question now. I am very disappointed in the results for the NDP, for I had hoped—and I thought it was a realistic hope—that they would gain enough seats to make it to a 30's count. Its standing in the House of Commons will be way out of proportion to their share of the popular vote, just as it is for the BQ, for which, of course, the disproportion works the other way. A reform of our electoral system, perhaps in the form of some meaningful recognition that a party's share of the popular vote should go towards its seat count, is badly needed; maybe an extra 100 seats should be allotted for this purpose. In the 2015 campaign Justin Trudeau promised electoral reform, but when his party moved from third to first place with a majority government, he dropped this commitment on the flimsiest of excuses. Because of this I told Glenn that this was the one big reason I could never vote for Trudeau. I am certain that electoral reform along the line I suggested would bring about a much bigger turnout of voters.

September 22

If I had been in grade nine in the Wallaceburg District High School more than sixty years ago I would have then read John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* since it was on the grade nine reading list of English literature for that year; as it was, I had gone from grade eight to grade ten, having been allowed to skip a grade (thanks very much to my mom's good word for me to the principal of the senior public school since I had been put back into grade eight less than three months after my family's arrival in Canada, the thinking being that my English was not good enough for high school.) I got a copy of it many years ago—a school edition printed in he 1960's—and have just finished reading it for the first time.

It is a short novel but it has offered me plenty of food for thought. It is what is called in German a *Bildungsroman*. a story about a person's growing up into adulthood, the chronological starting point being either childhood or adolescence. Knowles' s is the latter. The story is told by Gene as the first-person narrator as looks back, from the vantage of the much later years of mature adulthood, to his final two years at a private boys school in New Hampshire. The USA is of course at war and already at the beginning of the story, the summer of 1942, Gene, who is sixteen going on seventeen, is anticipating his enlistment in or being drafted into the American Armed Forces. His closest friend Phineas (Finny) sees the same future ahead of him. Finny, however, is very sceptical about the war, sounding like a complete pacifist who believes that war, like all wars, is a concoction of old men. Even so, Finny enjoys a commanding presence among his age-peers since he is the school's star athlete, and Gene himself, whose excellence lies in academics, looks up to him. Finny, by contrast, cares little for his studies, content just to get a passing grade and encourages his best friend to skip classes and even writing a crucial test in order to go out exploring with him, including a lengthy cycling trip with a night spent on the beach.

One of the biggest questions raised in the novel is whether there grows a latent resentment in Gene towards toward Finny for his rebellious ways and escapades and the awe in which he is held by his schoolmates. And this question links up with the possibility that Finny's fall from a lofty tree branch leading to serious injury and the end of his athletic pre-eminence was not simply an accident but a prank played on him by his best friend: this overarching question, as I see it, is never resolved. In any case, despite what has been called by critics the Fall from Innocence, the friendship continues, and with an even greater urgency. In the end, Finny dies from heart failure after a second fall, but Gene carries with him, even as he enlists, Finny's rejection of the mindless spirit of war, having chosen, at least in the inner recesses of his mind, "A Separate Peace," not the peace that comes with victory in war.

Unlike Gore Vidal's striking and pioneering novel. *The City and the Pillar*, which he saw published in 1948 when he was still only in his early twenties and which explores the growing homoerotic relationship between two adolescents growing into manhood, Knowles's 1959 novel, not surprisingly for its age, just about completely suppresses sexuality, whether homo or hetero. But it does surface, obliquely but still pointedly, in one early episode. Finny has received from his mother an expensive pink shirt, not a conventional dress shirt with buttons up and down the front but one that must be pulled over the head. When tells Gene it is his "emblem," the latter exclaims, "Over your head? Pink! It makes you look like a *fairy*." Finny replies, "Does it?" and then looking in the mirror and buttoning the shirt's high collar says "mildly. 'I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone,'" and when Gene exclaims, "You're nuts," Finny follows up by saying, "Well, in case suitors begin clamoring at the door, you can tell them I am wearing this as an emblem." Is Finny simply provoking Gene with a bohemian rebelliousness of which his pink is emblematic, or does all of this go deeper?

September 24

It is time to return to the Canadian novel. I am going to start with seven novels that speak of same-sex (female and male) desire and love, first two by two well-known female authors, the American-born Jane Rule and the Québecoise Marie-Claire Blais, the remainder being by male authors After that, I will take up seven novels by four other highly regarded and internationally known writers. I will be reading all these works for the second time but, with the exception of Raziel Reid's, *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* (2014), that was quite a long time ago, and so it will be a pleasure to rediscover them. I begin with Rule's *Desert of the Heart*, the earliest published (1964) of all the novels to be discussed.

September 27

A glorious early fall day: a cool night followed by warm shine under a cloudless sky; the leaves are just beginning to turn, but the wild flowers, with the exception of a light blue species I do not the name of are now withering fast.

Over the past week I have been touched by two exceptional instances of characteristically Nova Scotian kindness and helpfulness. At a check out of the local Atlantic Superstore I had some difficulty using my debit card. It was a minor thing and with another try I could have easily fixed my mistake myself. However, the young woman behind the counter came out from behind and performed the necessary step so that I could type in my passcode. Then yesterday afternoon I

was sitting in Chris's car in the Rotary Park near Wolfville overlooking the Gaspereau Valley and reading a book while waiting for Chris to finish his jogging along the Ridge Road, which he said he would do for 45 minutes, When after an hour he still had not returned I got a bit nervous: Chris was coming out of a heavy cold; might he have pushed himself too far? A car pulled up beside and I chatted for a minute with the driver, a gentleman my age or a bit younger, telling him I was waiting for my friend and was getting a bit anxious. He drove off with a friendly greeting: two minutes later he was back to tell me that he had seen Chris jogging along the Ridge Road and not far off.

September 29

Thanks to the "Wild Flowers of Nova Scotia" website, I have identified the flower I mentioned in my previous entry as the forget-me-not.

It has been a pleasure for me to read for a second time after many years June Rule's *Desert of the Heart*, published in 1964 as her first novel; I have also enjoyed the fine 1985 movie based on it. The novel is set in Reno, Nevada, in 1958, at a time when not a single American state had decriminalized homosexuality, something that even in Canada was not to happen until 1969, so its being written for publication was an act of considerable courage: its third-person narrator tells the story of two women finding themselves falling in love with one another. The two women are Evelyn, a professor of English at a California university who is in Reno to get a quick and relatively easy divorce from her husband of 16 years, and Ann, at 25 years much younger than Evelyn, working at a casino but, in fact, a gifted artist who is gaining an increasing reputation as a cartoonist. Their story is told in Rule's characteristic manner—which I also associate with two of her other novels I have read—that combines an elegant briskness with an unsentimental empathy: Evelyn is distancing herself from a loveless and pointless marriage, while Ann has set aside her all-controlling father and now is striving for autonomy and independence. At first there appears to be a fundamental conflict between the emotional needs of these two women, but they are overcome when Evelyn decides to forego the security of her teaching position and set up home with Ann. Rule does a superb job in contrasting the artificial, altogether de-natured busyness of Reno with the majestic solitude of the surrounding desert and its crystal blue lake, where Ann and Evelyn go one day to swim.

Marie-Claire Blais's *Nights in the Underground* (I have the English translation) has come to me as a bit of a downer to me after Rule's. novel. (Indeed, through all the works of hers I've read there runs a wide streak of pessimism.) I am sure I read it for the first time decades ago—although, I am sure, my reading then was hardly more than a quick paging through—but my recollection of it was so blurred that this time it seemed like a first-time reading. It was published in 1974, but it is obviously set in the early to the mid-60's, mainly in Montreal and secondarily in Paris. It is focused on the lesbian subculture that flourished in bars, clubs and restaurants, and as a bleak subculture it is most certainly portrayed, despite the alcohol fuelled gaiety and eroticism, even if we exclude the rivalries, jealousies, the breakups and, above all, the emotionally wounded personalities. Still, there are moments, hours, and even days and nights when there is a spirit of camaraderie and mutual helpfulness bringing women together. I was, in fact, drawn to women such as Geneviève, Jill, Lali (whose traumatized childhood in Nazi Austria is intimated a number of times), Léa, Louise, Marielle, and René. Blais's third-person narrative

is richly descriptive of milieu and psychologically penetrating. It draws heavily—sometimes too much for my taste—on lengthy stretches of indirect (i.e. narrator-mediated) interior monologue, especially towards the end in the meandering ruminations of Françoise, who, as the chronically unhappy lover of Geneviève, becomes a major character towards the end.

September 30

Thanks to the TCM I had the good fortune yesterday of watching for the first time most of two of the greatest silent movies of the 1920's. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) deserves all the acclaim it has received over the years. Rénee Maria Falconetti is immensely moving as Joan, her face registering every tumultuous emotion from the beginning to the end, the cinematography of an almost continual closeup moving all of this flawlessly along, and interspersed with the many closeups rendering starkly monumental the faces of the judges who condemn her, together with the almost angelic face of the priest who comforts and gives her her last Eucharist. The crowd scenes are also masterfully rendered in an almost abstract expressionism.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a grand melodrama of family and war (1921), based on the novel by the Spanish author Vicente Blasco Ibañez; it tells the story of an Argentinian family of mixed European heritage and at times racked by intra-familial conflict which is plunged, about hallway through the movie, into the carnage of WWI. Rudolph Valentino is Julio, who finally enlists in the French army, while a cousin of his fights on the German side; the two have a face-to-face encounter on the field of battle, with an artillery strike killing them both. This was the role which made Valentino an international movie star and heart throb. The movie, with its scenes of German military brutality, is as anti-German as the novel. The novel, published in 1916 (the English translation in 1918) takes the story only to the middle of the war, the movie to its very end.

October 2

Leonard Cohen's 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers* has been a big disappointment to me. I had quickly paged through it decades ago and had been impressed by one passage which spoke of erotic love between two men in such as way that it was clear there it involved much more than simply sex but also embraced deep affection. I had obviously paid little attention to Cohen's work as a whole. The novel is presented as a first-person narrative, with the narrator, who is not named, engaged in a dialogue much of the time with his mentor and fellow libertine and fantasist simply named K. There is a lot of explicit sex talk peppered with four-letter words; it is mainly hetero- but the homo-stuff also gets some attention; there is even talk about the pleasure of having sex with thirteen-year old girls—this fact would have ensured the certainty today of no publisher. The narrator also follows in great detail the story of a mythical sainted maiden, a convert to Christianity, in 17th century Nouvelle France: what is the point? Sentiments of Québecois nationalism, even sovereign nationhood, begin to abound as the story chugs towards its end. Cohen did well to find his métier soon as a singer, songwriter, and poet.

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October 5

I have read now more than half of Scott Symons\s *Place d'Armes* and I will probably finish it in the next two days. I bought it decades ago and remember paging through it quickly then, interested only in the homosexual episodes. A totally superficial response of course, it being clear that this extraordinary novel published in 1967 and creating such a sensation then deserves the best that a careful, intensive reading can offer. At this point for me it defies ready summary and response: it is truly a unique work, absolutely *sui generis*.

October 8

I am glad I was able to be at the funeral of Charlie Druet in Amherst yesterday. His ashes,, brought by Pat, his wife, all the way from Surrey B.C., were buried next to his parents' gravesite, where Scott's ashes are also resting. Family members from Surrey, Winnipeg, and Amherst as well as friends from Nova Scotia including myself stood around the gravesite as a Catholic priest read the simple liturgy for the dead; it was a moving experience for me. I had first met Charlie and Pat in late May 1979 when Scott—still going by his birthname Brian then— and I enjoyed their hospitality for a few days during a Vancouver stop-over, which was a welcome period of rest for us for in our grand Amtrak tour of the USA. Charlie and Pat moved back to Amherst in 2005 and I got to them extremely well, enjoying their wonderful hospitality—those superb dinners cooked by both Charlie and Pat!—when I came to Amherst once or twice a year in order to visit Scott's gravesite. They moved back to B.C. in 2018 order to be close to their two daughters there.

The long bus trip to Amherst and back home offered the spectacle of the fall colours, unforgettably glorious under the sunniest and bluest oof skies especially in the vast golden vistas which engrossed me as the bus drove through the Cobequid Pass.

October 9-10

Now that I have finished reading *Place d'Armes* and had the opportunity to give it a lot more thought, I feel more confident about my ability to make some meaningful comments and conclusions. First of all, it is most definitely a thoroughly autobiographical novel, despite the fact that the author uses a double for himself, Hugh Anderson, as the protagonist of the novel; Hugh in turn pretends that he is writing a novel in which a certain Andrew Harris is the central figure; Andrew turns up a few times as the narratee or the first-person speaker, but both he and Hugh are just props: it is most certainly Scott Symons who is the novel's central figure, the protagonist who speaks both as the third- and the first-person narrator. For this reason, I will dispense with these props.

After travelling by train from Toronto to Montreal—a journey where the passed and noted sights of town and country are often described in some detail—Scott heads for Vieux Montreal and stays there for twenty-two days in a hotel close to the Place d'Armes and its Church of Notre Dame; these become the focal point for his sojourn in the Old City, from which he departs only a few times for the newer parts of downtown Montreal, above all Place Ville-Marie and the Place des Arts, both if which he loathes. The protagonist describes Old Montreal in exquisite detail drawing on his impressive knowledge of architecture, always returning to the Place and its

magnificent 19th century Neo-Gothic church, both together for him the sacred pivot of his search for ultimate meaning and authenticity.

Scott combines the linguistic virtuosity of a James Joyce with the passion of a D.H. Lawrence, a passion which pursues carnality i.e. his homosexuality—he has sex with three young male sex workers—which in his mind is fused with both the physicality and the spirituality of the Eucharist; here his thinking, feeling, and writing take on what convention would call blasphemy, for Symons, however, this makes for an ecstasy, both carnal and spiritual, which is the experiential heart of French Canadian Catholicism and is emblazoned in the rich Baroque interior—the habitant or peasant Baroque, as he calls it—of the Church of the Notre Dame. All this is totally foreign to the Anglo-Protestant religious and cultural milieu in which Symons was raised and which he now passionately rejects and detests.

In glaring contrast to the vitality of authentic French Canadian religiosity and culture as a whole, according to Symons the Anglophone Canada of today is effete and pallid, completely divorced from its sturdy pioneer roots, the men unmanned, its women shrewish, and its political figures colourless—the novel was written just before the rise of Trudeaumania; and increasingly, it is falling under the spell of the hollow American Dream. He derides the imminent Expo 1967 as exemplifying all of this politico-cultural sterility.

I cannot but be sharply critical of Symons for his continual throwing overboard of good judgment, also political judgment, which goes as far as to hold up Arthur Meighen, very briefly prime minister twice during the 1920's, as the greatest prime minister Canada would never allow him to be: Meighen was, in fact, resolutely anti-French and anti-Quebec and a lengthy tenure by him of the position of prime minister would have been disastrous to Confederation. The protagonist likes to imagine a new Canada in which Anglophone and Francophone will coexist in perfect synergy. The ideal Anglophone is, of course, of English, Scottish, and Irish descent; Anglophone Canadians of different European origin, summarily categorized as the "Ethnics" hardly count in this Canada, but they (i.e. the Italians, naturally, in this case) are credited with introducing Canada to pizza. The indigenous peoples also receive scarce attention: the "Indians" are praised for the fine beadwork of their moccasins and far less flattering, Inuit ("Eskimo") stone carvings are dismissed as stuff for the tourist trade. This is not the Canada I and indeed he vast majority of Canadians know and value today, but I guess we cannot expect more from a Canadian novel published in 1967.

Wikipedia's excellent biography has helped me immensely in making my final overall assessment of Scott Symons as a man and as the author of his great novel, and I am looking forward now to getting hold of his second novel, *Civic Square*, in which, I assume, Toronto, Montreal's complete antipode, holds central place. All his life Symons was a rebel through and through, not even fitting in with the mainstream gay and lesbian liberation movement, prizing as he did his own stance as a sexual outlaw. He was a true Red Tory, deeply attached to his ancestral roots but, paradoxically, at the same time, a fierce social critic; I compare him in this respect with Jonathan Swift. But I must close by saying that I consider *Place d'Armes*, flawed though what I'd call its idées fixes are, one of the greatest novels I have ever read and a true *rara avis* of Canadian literature, It is, above all, a novel of sensibility, a term which the

protagonist in the novel at one point uses himself; I done not to hesitate to place it alongside such classics as Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*.

October 12

Raziel Reid's novel for young adults, *When Everything Feel Like the Movies*, has left me feeling very ambivalent. One cannot help but admire the brashness and audacity of its queer teenage protagonist, the flamboyant and cross-dressing Jude, who likes to imagine himself in every twist and turn of his life as an actor in a melodramatic Hollywood movie and is indeed aspiring to set out for Hollywood to make his career there. Still, there is no doubt in my mind that his end is tragic even if in his dying moments the movie glow is still there in Jude's mind. He had invited disaster by his aggressive courting of the handsome straight Luke, who in an outburst of extreme rage shot him Jude's steeping himself in movie fantasy has reminded me a bit of the Jewish boy who is the central hero of the 1980's movie, *The Lucky Star,* as an aficionado of the American westerns he likes to cast himself in his imagination as a heroic law-enforcing sheriff in the old West; the context is of course totally different there as the story takes place in Holland under the 1940-45 German occupation and the boy's fight as he moves from one hiding place to another is against the genocidal Nazis; he, too, is finally shot and killed. I found this film immensely moving and while its ending left me with deep admiration for the young man's courage, it was mingled with the overwhelming feeling that a terrible tragedy had taken place.

October 14

Glenn and I went to see *No Tine to Die* at the Cineplex last night. On reflection, I believe this is as far as the James Bond franchise can be taken. Daniel brought a unique intensity and emotional engagement into his role as James Bond, and this was his final movie playing this quasi-mythical character. With Bond dead and gone now, where can the series go from here even with a fine actor like Henry Carvill supposedly being considered as the next Bond? Let it rest on its laurels, in my opinion, as the most remarkable movie franchise, stretched over nearly 60 years, ever.

I discovered recently Michel Dorais's *Rent Boys: The World of Male Worker* (the English translation from the French coming out in 2006) was not a novel but a sociological study. I have gone through it quickly and think it is good, compact introduction to the subject but carrying no real surprises for me. It brought to mind a Canadian movie, *Twist* (2003)—the allusion to Charles Dickens's novel is obvious—-which I have in my library and watched about a a year ago, the big difference, though, being between the two that today's male sex workers, unlike their female counterparts usually work as lone operators.

October 16

It was a pleasure to read Michel Tremblay's *The Heart Laid Bare* for the second time after reading it first decades ago—the translation from the French was published in 1986. Like *Desert of the Heart* it is a story of the growing love between two persons of the same sex leading to a committed relationship. There is an almost equally important parallel between he two novels: like Evelyn and Ann, Marc-Jean and Mathieu are not age-peers, with a difference of fifteen years

separating the older Marc-Jean from the twenty-four year old Mathieu and approximately the same for Rule's couple. The relationship between the two in Tremblay's story is complicated by the fact that Mathieu is divorced and has a four-old son, Sébastien, who will be spending some time each month with his father and his father's partner. The two men are very much in love with each other, but Marc-Jean has a major psychological adjustment to make from his old life-style as a confirmed bachelor punctuated only by the occasional brief romantic affair and a lot of one-night stands; fortunately, he is successful and also grows in fact quite fond of Mathieu's bright and charming little boy. The relationship is also helped by the fact Mathieu is finally achieving some success as an aspiring actor but with little formal training; it comes with appearing in commercials but it is an auspicious beginning.

The big difference between Rule's and Tremblay is that the love-story of the former takes place in the strictly heteronormative Reno of 1958, while the latter develops in Montreal of the 1980's, where despite the still not uncommon homophobia the milieu is far more tolerant and, in fact, a very diverse gay and lesbian subculture flourishes. Evelyn and Ann, on the one hand, and Marc-Jean and Mathieu, ton on the other, thus face very different social and even psychological challenges.

I have enjoyed the brisk narrative style and manner of both Rule and Tremblay, very different and quite welcome to me for a change from the challenges towards an appreciative reading I faced in the novels of Blais, Cohen, and Symons.

October 19

Over the past ten days or so I have slowed down a bit in my current reading project on the Canadian novel; by the next week I should be able to return to it at full strength. Since Glenn and I were to see on last Wednesday at the local Cineplex the newly released movie, *No Time to Die*, the final James Bond movie starring Daniel Craig, I decided it would be worth my while to study the James Bond phenomenon more closely. I had come to the James Bond movies rather late, well past the 1960's, and then had watched them only on tv and, later, on dvd. Glenn certainly did a great deal to stimulate my interest over the past few decades. Before last Wednesday, I watched the four previous Bond movies starring Daniel Craig as well as the first three movies in the Bond series. Since then I have continued and I have just finished watching *License to Kill*; all that remains now are the four Bond movie starring Pierce Bronson. I will then pass to my comments, both positive and negative.

But first of all, an overarching comment or critique of mine which occurred to me during my morning walk earlier today. I see now James Bond as the contemporary embodiment of Nietzsche's *Ubermensch*, the true Renaissance man tailored, though, to the culture and tastes of today, above all, of course, of the multitudes of men who identify with the image and try to aspire to it. It is a heroic if vulgarized fantasy brought up to date with today's science and technology and most of all, with the worldwide social conditions of today in which the liberation of women, both as hoped for ideal and as progressing reality, stands out. These two sentences are a mouth full, I admit, but they pack in what consider the most significant characteristics of the James Bond phenomenon.

October 22-23

I may have pushed it too far in drawing an existential or conceptual connection between Nietzsche's *Ubermensch* and Ian Fleming's James Bond, but there is a solid connection between the two in that both these figures of fantasy are embedded in the past and the present of the West, not in mythical lands and domains such as in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, The German philosopher's creation is imbued with the life-affirming spirit, as Nietzsche idealizes it, of the men of pre-Socratic ancient Greece as well as with the *virtu* of the larger-than-life men who ruled the city states of Renaissance Italy, white Bond moves in the world of British Intelligence, the Cold War, and vast criminal conspiracies, As the indomitable James squares off against brutal ideologues, megalomaniacs, and psychotic geniuses, we see he is not the hero of a conventional thriller, whether it is book or movie, but performs superhuman feats which indeed bestow on him a mythical status; even so, he is firmly placed inside the world of the 1960\s and beyond.
Along the almost sixty years now they have been coming out, the Bond movies move increasingly into the high-tech sphere (I ignore *Dr No* right at the beginning where what you might call the evil doctor's high-tech lair is so obviously fake that even when I watched the movie for the first time I could not take the sumptuous display of it very seriously). The digital revolution bringing with it the computer- generated special effects, which became more and more noticeable after a few decades, accelerated this progression. For this reason, the earlier movies where the high-tech is less pronounced or even pretty well non-existent, as for example, the second Bond film, *From Russia With Love*, and, even in the early 80's, *For Your Eyes Only*, or late in that same decade, *Licence to Kill*, have for me a special cachet, and the piling up of more and more wonderworking technology and science (or pseudo-science) fails to continue impress me.

While the ignoring of common-sense observation and knowledge is to be expected throughout, at times it becomes patently ridiculous. I am thinking especially of when darkness has fallen on Christmas Eve in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*—an otherwise superior Bond film— and Bond and Tracy find themselves in a Swiss village: there are crowds thronging the streets, fireworks, and even a car race: is that really what we would expect anywhere at this time of the year? All the more impressive, therefore, by contrast are the moments of authentic and authentically expressed emotion. Thus, at very end of the same movie, just after Tracy has been shot dead, Bond's first response to a policeman is one of denial—everything is OK— and then as the policeman on his motorcycle moves on, Bond breaks down in grief, bending over the body of his newly wed bride, sobbing. There is also a quick moment right at the beginning of *For Your Eyes Only* when we see Bond standing absorbed in memory at the gravesite of Tracy. I was struck by the genuine way in which Bond, now played by Daniel Craig, in *Casino Royale* I comforts the brutally traumatized Vesper, sitting beside her and putting his arm around her—he does not have to say anything—as the two are sitting on the wet floor underneath a still dripping showerhead. Finally, the closing episode of *No Time to Die*, is very visibly high-charged with Bond's emotions as he desperately strives and fights to save the life of Madeleine, his wife, and their little daughter; he is successful but at the cost of his own life.

Now that the fictional James Bond has met his fictional end, it remains to be seen if the Bond mythos can be carried successfully any further with a new actor taking on the brand. I myself

think that it, in all its progressions and permutations, has gone as far as it possibly could have: what would follow now would be boringly unoriginal. Glenn believes differently. In a few years we'll know who is right. I have just thought, though, that no Bond movie has ever grappled in depth with climate change: this would be a fresh and urgently timely theme.

October 24

A get-together of seven people, Sonia and Gerry, Vernon and Tammy, Chris, Glenn, and myself, at my place last night. I hadn't seen anything like this in my home since the start of the pandemic; in fact, the last time was several years ago, Ample great food, ample to drink, good conversation, and three guys bringing and playing their guitars, Although it started to get dark outside well before 7.00 pm, it all felt like the dawning of a new day.

October 26-27

I have just finished Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992),and, before that, his *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987)—the seemingly strange title of the latter comes from the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamish*, where the eponymous central character says that he will clothe himself in a lion's skin, the lion of course being a symbol of courage, which is appropriate for him in his search of immortality or at least some sort of afterlife, a search imposed him by the death of his beloved comrade Enkidu.. This has been a second reading for me of both novels. My recollection of the first drew on two great milestones of engineering and construction in the history of Toronto, namely the massive overpass between Bloor Street and Danforth Street, completed in 1918, and the impressive new waterworks in the Beaches area of East Toronto, completed in 1934; the work on both of these is described in great detail and with great precision. I must admit that these stories stuck in my mind much more than the comings and goings of the novel's central characters. My recollection of the second was prompted to a large degree by the much acclaimed (nine Oscars including the one for Best Movie), mesmerizing movie adaptation (1996), but equally by what was, for me, the novel's most compelling central character, namely Kirpal Singh ("Kip"), the young Sikh sapper in the British army fighting its way, along with the Canadians and the Americans, up the Italian Peninsula in WWII.

Ondaatje is a distinguished poet and his mastery of the art of poetry registers powerfully in the prose of these two novels. To be honest, in the earlier stages of my reading of *In the Skin of the Lion*, I did not fully take to this. The narrative and description are continually replete with imagery which, which while often striking and even beautiful, created, to my way of reading and reflecting on what I was reading, a barrier to my really to coming to grips with two of the major characters in the novel, Clara and Alice. My understanding of these figures remains impressionistic, even nebulous. Fortunately, my encounters with the three other major characters, Patrick, Hana (the young daughter of Alice and Patrick), and Caravaggio—a telling choice of name—have much more defined contours, and I wss pleased to see later on that Hana and Caravaggio are central characters in *The English Patient*. My appreciation of literature leans towards a partiality to social realism and there are some stark stretches of *In the Skin of a Lion*, notably in the ghastly labour conditions in a Toronto factory, where Patrick works for a while, given over to the tanning and dyeing of hides of newly slaughtered animals; the spirit of the

vivid, unsparing descriptions here is reminiscent of Emile Zola's masterpiece of social realism, *Germinal*.

The English Patient is a far more complex, intricately structured novel in which memory-time blends with real-time, the latter mostly being the spring and summer of 1945, which unfold in an abandoned villa, much damaged by gun and artillery fire, near Florence. The allied troops have moved on driving the Germans farther and farther north, leaving Hana, now a 20-year old nurse in the British army, and the mysterious severely burned English patient behind. Soon the now middle-aged Caravaggio, still "the thief "of the earlier novel, makes his presence felt, his mind full of memories as he looks back at his escapades and hair-breadth escapes in wartime Italy. Also making his entrance is "Kip," whose memories take him back to his family in India, the remarkable course of his training in England, and, remembered with spectacularly precise detail, his defusing of a massive bomb. The mystery of the English patient unfolds bit by bit as the reader is taken back to pre-War Cairo, where his—it is indeed *his* as we start to recognize—passionate affair with the wife of a prominent English traveller and explorer of the Sahara desert blossoms, a romance that ends tragically a few year later in the midst of the desert war between the British and the Germans. We learn a lot in the meantime about the colourful lore of the desert and its tribal inhabitants and the rampant suspicions about the spying back and forth between the Germans and the British. There is a brief sexual relationship between "Kip" and Hana, but the novel ends, as we move forwards in time, with the former a doctor raising a family in India, and with Hana back in Toronto, she too putting the relationship behind her and finding a new and satisfying life for herself. I have found this ending, although inevitably still touched with melancholy, very satisfying. Ondaatje's prose, I have found this time, is at times even more sensuous than in his previous novel, but this time it worked for me.
I have started reading Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter*, to be followed by *The Stone Carvers*.

November 1-2

It was again wonderful to experience an act of kindness. It happened this morning as I was walking home carrying two rather heavy bags of groceries I had picked up at Walmart. A fellow from my neighbourhood whom I hadn't met before, Alec—a very fit-looking guy, he must have been in his sixties: he and his family had recently moved here—offered to help. At first, I declined, saying I was managing OK and needed the exercise, but when he insisted, I gladly accepted.

Finished reading *The Underpainter*—a first time reading—and *The Stone Carvers* yesterday. The *Underpainter is* beautifully written—one critic rightly called the prose "crystalline"—but the story is bleak. Austin, the central character who is also the first-person narrator, loses his still very young mother at an early age and then is left alone with his uncommunicative father. He eventually chooses a career as an art painter, establishing himself in New York and aligning himself in his art with the Neorealist school. of which I myself am most familiar with Edward Hopper—who is briefly mentioned—and, later on in the last century, with Alex Colville, whom I got to know well when he was chancellor of my university. Austin is a meticulous artist—well know for his exacting technique of "underpainting"—for whom light is the most exalted manifestation of reality, to capture which, in his paintings and, finally, in the spaciously opened-up home of his old age, he spares no effort. Artist and aesthete though that he is, Austin's life

becomes increasingly barren of deep feeling, eventually committing a rash act which contributes to the joint suicides of his best Canadian friend, George, and George's life-partner, Augusta, and forfeiting a lasting relationship of love with his long-time friend Sara—who makes her home on the awesomely rugged north shore of Lake Superior—notwithstanding the fact that she has served as the principal model for his paintings and that he has had an intimate sexual relationship with her for many years. Thus, in the end he lives alone, without love.

I had read *The Stone Carvers* for the first time quite a few years ago and I remember being impressed already then with its profound wisdom. My second reading, just completed, enhanced this recollection, to which was added my great admiration for, once more, the crystalline clarity of the prose. The story starts in mid- 19th century Bavaria and the immigration from there to Canada by a Catholic congregation led by their priest—a prominent figure in the novel's early part—as they establish themselves as a distinct community in southern Ontario. Soon the two principal characters, Klara and and Tilman, sister and brother and grandchildren of the immigrant Joseph Beckman, emerge; both are grievously impacted by the First World War, but eventually, years after the war's end, they betake themselves—Klara at the beginning necessarily disguised as a man—to France to make the contribution of their sculpting skills—inherited from their grandfather—in the erection of the Vimy Memorial, this under the stern, all-embracing direction of the master sculptor Walter Allward, who starts to take a special interest in their work. In the course of their exacting work on this monument, which is so expressive of majesty in mourning— and so utterly different, I should add, from the hideously colossal (very unlike the NY Statue of Liberty) of the sword-brandishing warrior woman commemorating the Soviet victory in the Battle of Stalingrad—both Klara and Tilman find their peace and a new beginning in their lives.

Last evening, thanks, as often before, to HBO, I watched from the beginning to the end—I had seen only snatches of it before—the 2012 movie based on Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning 1981 novel, *Midnight's Children*. It is an especially distinguished Canadian production. with Rushdie himself as the writer of the screen play, a co-producer, and as the movie's narrator; the film also shows the distinct touches of the director, Deepa Mehta, well known for her earlier direction of *Fire*, *Earth,* and *Water* This superbly acted and produced movie blends, in my opinion, in good balance the very different artistic modes of social and magic realism as it follows the march of history, concentrated in the central character of Saleem, in India and, later on, in Pakistan from 1917 to the late 1970's. Magic realism, that is, high fantasy and even the supernatural blending with common-sense, 'just as it is' depiction of reality, is the distinct mark of nearly all of Rushdie's fiction; the equal prominence of social realism may be, as one critic suggests, Mehta's special contribution.

November 4

Thanks to HBO I was also able to watch the three other movies directed by Deepa Mehta mentioned in the previous entry. I had never seen *Fire* before, the movie that stirred up so much anger in Hindu India because it portrayed two married women, unhappily married, gravitating towards a erotic relationship with each other. I thought this, the earliest (1997) of the three films, the weakest, too cliched and part of the story being quite unbelievable, namely with one of the two delinquent husbands withholding a sexual relationship from his wife because he was

completely under the spell of his guru, who prescribed to him a life of self, denial including celibacy. The second movie, *Earth*, which I'd seen only in part before, was stirring and tragic, with its story of a wealthy Parsee family caught up in the massive storm of intercommunal violence that swept India as it gained its independence in 1947. The third and most recent (2006) movie, *Water*, I had seen before but only now did it have its full impact. Both melancholy and, with its continual river scenes (the Ganges?) and haunting flute music, strikingly poetic, set in 1938, it showed the sad lot of discrimination and apartheid imposed by traditional Hinduism on widows, even young widows and child brides. However, towards the end, we are also made vividly aware of the promise brought by Mahatma Gandhi as he reaches out to the masses with his enlightened, humanistic Hinduism.

November 6, 2021

Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya:* That was the first live stage performance which I, together with Glenn, was able to take in last night in almost two years. A festive occasion for me and many others in the hall of the Al Whittle Theatre in Wolfville The strength of Chekhov's last three and most esteemed plays (*Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*) as I see it, going by the two other plays in this trio that I have seen on the live stage, does not lie in dramatic momentum but in elaborate and nuanced character portrayal, which in performance, however, must not descend to tepidity. This, unfortunately, did happen in this performance; only the two leading male characters, the uncle and the retired professor were portrayed with a strength from which they were able to establish firmly their unmistakable individuality. Not surprisingly, both were played by seasoned actors with a good measure of professional experience. I have a number of Chekhov's plays in my library: I must read *Uncle Vanya* now to see if my opinion holds up,

Later in the day: now that I have read the text—in translation of course—of *Uncle Vanya*, my estimation of the play has grown immensely. The text of the stage production was cut far too much for this stage production, and the doctor has become in my eyes a truly major character.

November 8

It looks like I'll be able to finish my survey of the English-language Canadian novel well before Christmas. Right now I am working on three novels of Guy Vandenhaeghe and then will move on to Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*..I have been fortunate to get from the Acadia Library the four remaining novels—one each by Frederick Grove, Morley Callaghan, Rudy Wiebe, and Margaret Lawrence—I needed to add to my study and will conclude this with a summary retrospective on Margaret Atwood's novels, all of which I have read and have in my library. My study then will have progressed from Sara Jeannette Duncan's 1904 *The Imperialist* to Atwood's 2020 *The Testaments*.

What will come next? I'm not sure yet but will probably start to take on non-fiction works with a philosophical bent, all of which I have read in the past but deserve a second—or even a third, fourth etc.—reading. This will take my *Pensées* back to the religious and philosophical perspectives I adumbrated at the beginning, and in doing so I may start a new series, namely *Pensées* II. Additionally, I may also dip into some of the American novels I have in my library

which I think deserve an at least second reading; these readings combined, of course, cannot even pretend to amount to a survey.

November 10-11

I have finished reading two of the three novels by Guy Vanderhaeghe I had set myself to read, I had read *The Last Crossing* years ago but my recollection of it had become so hazy that only a few episodes seemed familiar to me, I am quite sure I had never read *The Englishman's Boy* — the earliest (1996) of the three novels—but I knew its basic story because I had in my collection the CBC movie (2006) based on it. The screen play was written by Vanderhaeghe himself and while, not surprisingly therefore, the movie adaptation was very good—with, among others, superb production values—the ending which comes with the execution of Shorty McAdoo for the murder of Damon Ira Chance, is very different from the far more open-ended ending of the novel.

The novel is stunning and I am pretty sure that once I have finished the third novel, *A Good Man*, it will remain my favourite of the three. Its special allure for me, as, I am sure, it has been for all its readers, is that the story moves back and forth between the American and Canadian West of 1873 and Hollywood of the early-twenties, and that there is a gaping discrepancy between the horror of the slaughter of a small band of Assiniboine men, women, and children and the glamorous hero-worshipping movie Hollywood has made about it. The Englishman's Boy, namely Shorty McAdoo, still a teenager, belongs to the group of men, mostly American, who commit this atrocity, witnesses all of it, and is still traumatized by it when we meet him almost half a century later in Los Angeles and Hollywood. Vanderhaeghe's narrative and descriptive powers are exceptional, and all the major and minor characters are perfectly realized. I am also impressed with the author's linguistic virtuosity, ranging from the grandiose but racist philosophizing about America's Manifest Destiny delivered by the movie's producer, Damon Ira Chance, to the rough, ungrammatical, expletive-laden speech of most of the other characters.

The Last Crossing, which I must have read only superficially years ago because I remembered only a few episodes as I read it for the second time, has the same exceptional qualities of narrative and description as *The Englishman's Boy* together with an impressive array of vividly portrayed major characters, which includes one historical person, the Scottish-Blackfoot Jerry Potts, as well as the memorable Custis Straw, a deeply scarred, both physically and psychologically, veteran of the American Civil War, but I still slightly prefer the earlier novel for the way it so starkly lays bare the subjugation and degradation—erupting at times, in the so-called Indian Wars of the American West., in outright massacre—of the indigenous peoples by the white settlers, as no other novel I have read does. The later novel, however, does come in a close second with its stories of how American traders corrupted Canadian tribes with guns and whisky, much exacerbating thereby intertribal conflict and warfare; there are horrifyingly brutal stories of the latter. Added to all this must be added the almost genocidal diseases, above small pox, which the whites inflicted on indigenous communities.

November 14

In my reading—my fist-- of *A Good Man* I have found this the least compelling of the three novels by Guy Vanderhaeghe I've read, mainly because the story-line becomes at times too convoluted and digressive; the episode of the kidnapping of Wesley Case, the novel's central character, by the increasingly irrational and even psychotic Michael Dunne and his Fenian henchmen exemplifies, to me at least, this flaw. However, the novel also has great strengths. The story of the Fenian raid—a small but not insignificant invasion really—in Southern Ontario is vividly told through the recollections of Case, who was the commander of a unit of the Toronto militia. From the battle he carries with him the terrible guilt of being at least partially responsible for the death of 'Pudge' Wilson, his erstwhile schoolmate, with whom he has had a love-hate relationship. For me, the character---a historical figure---of James Walsh, Case's close friend, the commander of Fort Walsh held by the North-West Mounted Police, is the most memorable as the protector of the indigenous tribes who have fled from the United States in Canada, where they hope to be able to live in peace under the protection of the Queen, "The Old Woman," as they call her, In doing so Walsh forms a close friendship with Sitting Bull, the grand chief of the Sioux, with whom Case has a few meetings, climactic meetings where, through Case's eyes the reader comes to see Sitting Bull not as the bogeyman of American mythmaking but as a man and leader of great dignity and integrity. Walsh's advocacy fails to persuade the higher authorities and thus Sitting Bull and his Sioux and the other refugee tribes must return to the United States; Walsh himself is demoted. At the novel's end Case has won domestic happiness; the tragedy is Walsh's; he most certainly deserves the appellation "A Good Man."

I have selected three more novels in order to round out my survey of the Canadian novel: Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*, Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda*; for all of these this will be a second reading. I will read and comment on these before I turn to Rohinton Mistry.

November 17

Having finished reading *Microserfs* now, I am not sure if I read it before. I bought it with another novel by Coupland, *The Gum Thief*, the story of which I remember well, whereas my recollection of the 1995 novel was very vague. To be quite honest, my just finished reading reinforced for a while the earlier impression that *Microserf*s, the story as told by Dan, the narrator, in his diary was nothing but satire, parody, and dark humour, and this got to be very tiresome well before I was halfway through. Dan and his workmates, working first in Seattle for Bill Gates—referred to simply as the awesome, super-staid "Bill"— and then nearly all of them decamping to the Silicon Valley for a start-up company venture,, embody vividly, with heaps of hyperbole and endless streams of—most irritating to me— often impenetrable idiolect, the milieu of the high tech and the Digital Age as they were evolving in the mid-1990's—faxes still in use then— a decade before the explosion of the smartphone and social media, which would have ramped up things colossally. Then, what I like to call *humanitas*, namely generous empathy and deep feelings of uplift about oneself and others, begin to make themselves felt, as exemplified by friends' and work mates' complete acceptance of the sexuality of "Bug" as he comes out to them as a gay man. This sense of life heightens as the novel moves towards an ending which would befit a far more sentimental novel.

By googling I learned more about this world-famous author, who is also a highly acclaimed visual artist, and about his contributions over the years to the Terry Fox campaign: a Canadian Renaissance man indeed.

Glad that I accompanied by Andrea, Jude, and Ann yesterday morning to the meeting of the Council of the Municipality of the County of Kings where they made their presentation about the work of advocacy of the Valley Public Transit Riders Association. I complimented them afterwards about the quality, both professional and persuasive, of what they placed before the councillors, and was very happy that it was obviously well received. I was impressed with the new municipal building and its councillors' meeting hall, which I saw for the first time—all modern and high tech and superbly functional.

November 20

When Jeremiah Okimasis shows his younger brother Daniel the play *Ulysses Thunderchild* he has just written he responds as follows to his brother's somewhat negative comments: "If James Joyce can do one day in the life of an Irishman in Dublin, 1903, why can't I do one day in the life of a Cree man in Toronto, 1984." A Tom Highway -James Joyce connection can certainly be seen in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. The novel is indeed Joycean in its blend of social realism and myth. Myth and myth-making permeate Cree story-telling and the Cree sense of life, while one might say that mythification is embedded in Roman Catholic teaching and ritual into which Jeremiah and Daniel are continually thrust during their years in a Catholic residential school; There is also sex and sexuality: heterosexual in Jeremiah's case—although Highway, to a large extent Jeremiah's prototype, is gay--and in Cree family life, and homosexual, and, eventually very blatantly and promiscuously so, in the person ,of Daniel, although the sex comes with a rawness which is way beyond Joycean. Importantly, there is the theme of alienation, in *Ulysses* that of the Jewish Leopold Bloom from conventional Irish Catholic society, and in Jeremiah's and Daniel's case from, on the one hand, the family life and Cree society of their early childhood and from, on the other, the white man's civilization in which they later find themselves, and this despite the acclaim they for a while win there for themselves Jeremiah as a pianist and composer and Daniel as a dancer and choreographer. Humour is ample both in Joyce and in Highway, but also sadness, and in the *Kiss of the Fur Queen* deep tragedy as Daniel dies of AIDS towards the end. Highway, just like his fictional Jeremiah, is an accomplished pianist and composer, and this is tellingly and beautifully worked at times into musicology-tinted prose. At the end there is a helpful index of the numerous words and phrases of the Cree language—with translations--that are used throughout.

November 23

I was at first reluctant to read Joseph Boyden's *The Orenda* for a second time, having read it first not
long after its publication in 2013. I was dismayed then by the extreme violence and cruelty of the intertribal warfare between the Hurons and the Iroquois, all of this coming to a climax near the end
in the torture and death of the Jesuit missionary Christophe at the hands of the Iroquois. Fortified,

indeed exalted, by his trust in God, he bears his suffering heroically; even so, I found the graphic descriptions of the torture almost too panful to read and didn't think I wanted to read again.
However, I am glad now I overcame my initial hesitation. The novel is everything the critics have
acclaimed it to be: psychologically penetrating, and magnificently evocative of its setting in time and
place, certainly epic in its scale and grandeur. Using three central characters as first-person narrators,
the Huron chieftain Bird, his adopted daughter Snow Falls, and the Jesuit, the author has let me with
amazing clarity and fullness into the life and sense of life of each of them—a great achievement, which is not, in my judgment, diminished in any way by the fact that Boyden's claims of some indigenous ancestry have been challenged and criticized by some.

November 25

I have just finished reading Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Thanks above all to this epic-scale novel set in India from pre-Independence days to 1984, with its main focus on the India of 1975, the year when Indira Gandhi launched her so-called Emergency rule, the author established himself as the premier Canadian author of Indian origins. I read this novel many years ago, but it is only now that it has had its full impact on me, so much so that I'll need few days to sort it out in my mind and will then return to it early next week. A few years ago I read both Gregory David Robertson's *Shantaram* and Seth Vikram's *A Suitable Boy,* with which Mistry's novel invites immediate comparison. Therefore, I must draw these two into my assessment of *A Fine Balance*.

November 29

In the final analysis the story of *A Fine Balance* is a deeply tragic; the resilience and the *joie de vivre* exhibited by most of its characters throughout much of the novel are finally wiped out by the gross human rights abuses, including the most brutal of violence, with which Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule seeks to impose what its enforcers call law and order on India, unravelling the lives of the four principal characters. The story ends in 1984, the year in which Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh body guards, and parts of India are plunged into murderous pogroms against Sikh communities. That year Maneck returns to India from Dubai, where he has worked professionally and successfully for many years, but he is still haunted by the outright political murder of Avinash, his closest friend at the technical college where they both studied at the height of the Emergency, and the overwhelming sense of loss and meaninglessness leads him finally to take his own life—his final thought is of Avinesh as he hurls himself into the path of a fast moving train. Ishvar and hid nephew Om, both belonging to the Chamairi or Untouchable caste, have been left badly maimed as they are swept up into the forcible sterilization campaign; they can no longer practice their trade of tailoring and have to turn to beggary. Finally, Dina has lost her independence, having been evicted from her flat and no longer able to support herself as a tailor, and thus has had to move in with her older brother. For a while, these four had shared Dina's flat and their life together had been rich and joyous.

A Suitable Boy and *Shantaram* have their share of loss and tragedy but their sense of life is ultimately one of uplift. Like *A Fine Balance*, *Shantaram*,is set in Mumbai (although the city is not named in Mistry's novel) and also took me deep into the lives and struggles of India's underclasses. This novel with its vivid narrative and portrayal of character is especially remarkable because its author is Australian-born, a fugitive from Australian prison who fled to India and made his new home in Mumbai. *A Suitable Boy*, which is set in West Bengal in the early 1950's, remains my favourite of the three novels as it took me in great depth and with exquisite detail into the lives of four middle and upper class families, three Hindu and one Moslem.

December 1, 2021

After I read Frederick Grove's autobiographical *A Search for America* some time ago, I was eager to read one of his so-called Prairie novels and so was very happy recently to get hold of *Fruits of the Earth* together with three other Canadian novels published in 1930's and 60's. Here, too, I have not been disappointed. This is indeed a splendid, and ultimately not a tragic novel—here I differ from some readers—focused, like the other Prairie novels on the formidable challenges of recalcitrant soil and drought and flood continually endured by farmers, the first of them veritable pioneers, in the Manitoba of the early 20th century. The central character is the Lincolnesque Abe Spalding, a hardworking and ambitious pioneer—ambition joined, though, with exceptional civic mindedness— who becomes the premier farmer and landowner of his community. Going with along with the narrator, I immediately took a strong liking to him, even to his old-fashioned high sense of ethics and morality. Sadly, with his family he is uncommunicative, a man of few words, and emotionally engaged too little with his wife and his children, with the great exception of his son Charlie, who dies in a tragic accident midway in the story, a loss which haunts Spalding for the rest of his life. Even so, at the end he and the family hold together as they are faced with the plight of the younger daughter Frances, who finds herself pregnant by a married man. Additionally, after having withdrawn himself for a long time from public office because of a humiliating incident, Abe rejoins the community, which badly needs his services at a time of social and economic turmoil in the early 20's. Like Mitchell's *Who Has Seen The Wind*, *Fruits of the Earth* communicated to me a vivid sense of the prairie landscape and of the vagaries of an often unforgiving weather. For this reason alone, this novel will continue to stay with me.

Right at the beginning of his "Afterword" to the novel in the New Canadian Library series, Rudy Wiebe states flat out that *Fruits of the Earth* "is not a novel." I hate to disagree with one of Canada's most accomplished and respected authors and novelists, but I have read and enjoyed Grove's work as most definitely a novel. Wiebe says that Grove envisaged his work as a mega-novel focused on the fortunes of the community of the district of Spalding—fittingly named after its pioneer founder—as a whole, and would have named this *The Chronicles of Spalding*; however, the publisher would not go for this. Thus, what was eventually published in 1933 was only a fragment of an initially envisaged much larger work. Wiebe also claims that the novel as published might have worked even better in its literary-aesthetic impact if its major episodes had been written as a series of short stories, a genre of fiction in which Grove excelled. However, in my reading the novel works beautifully as a lengthy work of continuous prose fiction constructed

out of a number of successive episodes, distinct certainly but cumulative in their overall effect, and moving towards to a well plotted and surprisingly non-tragic ending. In Abe Spalding it has a vividly portrayed central character. Over the centuries the novel has proven to be an exceedingly flexible literary medium, and so there is no reason whatsoever to deny *Fruits of the Earth* its status as a novel. A final thought of mine is that "Chronicles" in the title would have suggested a bare-bone narrative of notable events, as, for instance, in the well-known *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* of a millennium ago.

December 3

Some time ago, I read a collection of Morley Callaghan's short stories as well the memoir of his summer spent in the Paris of 1929 and of his encounters there with literary celebrities such as Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce. I liked then the author's powers of recollection, observation, and thoughtfulness rendered in a fluent but not effusive prose style, the plain style "transparent as glass," as he once put it, and for this reason I became eager to read one of his novels; finally I was able to get a copy of *They Shall Inherit The Earth* from a fully reopened Acadia University Library which allowed me again to browse in its stacks. I have not been disappointed. The story is set in an unnamed American city (geographically Buffalo fits best although it also has a few touches of Toronto and its environs) and it takes the reader into the Great Depression of the 1930's. The novel's central character, Michael Aikenhead, an unemployed engineer, suffers the full brunt of the economic malaise, which morphs into a truly existential crisis for him complicated by dysfunctional and broken relationships which do not start to get healed until the story nears the end. In the course of events Michael's relationship with his father becomes additionally crippled by a tremendous guilt which is not resolved until the very end. Callaghan's Catholic sense of life permeates much of the story but it never becomes preachy; rather it is allowed eventually to shine as a great light in the "darkness of the soul."

I took to the prose style, again fluent, but still the plain style, although I find the comparison in this respect to Hemingway by Ray Ellenwood in his "Afterward" to the novel in the Canadian New Library series not quite right. For one thing—and indeed a major point for me—Callaghan makes a much more ample use of interior monologue, both direct and indirect (i.e. third-person and mediated by the narrator) than Hemingway. Where this is called for, the author is also a master of the heightened narrative and descriptive style, as in the episode where Michael and his stepbrother Dave find themselves at night in a rowboat on a lake near the family's rural home and which ends in Dave's drowning, or later in the story when Michael, his brother-in-law Ross, and the indigenous guide Jo go wolf-hunting in the bush in the dead of winter. Callaghan's career as an author and novelist was long and distinguished, more than 60 years. I wonder if he still receives his proper due in the literary scene of today's Canada. I will certainly read more of his novels.

December 4

I have just finished reading *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, the third of the four novels I picked up recently at the Acadia Library Having read some time ago Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* with such great pleasure and admiration, I was eager to turn to his first and highly

acclaimed first novel. The story is set in an isolated Mennonite farming community in Saskatchewan in 1944.The Second World War, however, does not fail to obtrude on the lives o nearly everyone thanks in part to the daily radio news casts but also to the anticipation that its young men, if they haven't enlisted already, will almost certainly be conscripted. That near-certainty weighs increasingly heavily on the mind of the central character, Thom, the eldest son in the Wiens family and as a capable and responsible young adult a model member of the community. Yes, he can claim conscientious objector status, but is it really ethical then to let someone else do the fighting which makes it possible for him and his community to live in undisturbed peace. He could offer to serve in the medical corps but for this, too, he would require military training. Joseph, a temporary teacher at the local school—let go after nine months because of his radical ideas—awakens such thoughts in his mind and also makes him question the stubborn exclusivity and closedness of his community, which manifests itself especially in the contempt it shows for the Métis who live in the area. This leads to conflict with the community's leading member, the dominant Deacon Block. However, when I learned from Block's own lips the terrible trauma he and his family suffered during the Russian civil war and famine in the early 20's, I empathized with him and even with his rigid adherence to what he regarded as an unquestionably Scripture -based tradition which guaranteed the peace and stability of every Mennonite community abiding by it. Shocking events, above all a terrible tragedy in the Deacon's family, shake this this conviction to its foundations, and Thom finally arrives at a much deeper understanding of Jesus' supposed pacifism.

Much of the narrative and description in Wiebe's is densely packed with concrete detail—whether it be of landscape, the weather, the farmer's work and its miscellany of tools and implements, the hitching or unhitching of horses to or from a buggy, and so forth. It makes the prose different from the on the whole "plain speech" of *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, and at times I found it too overwhelmingly rich in its detail-focused realism. However, it is a marvellously vivid and evocative style.

December 6

Margaret Laurence's *A jest of God* was her only so-called Manawaka novel I had never read and it was a pleasure finally to get hold of it. It is not surprising it won the Governor-General's prize in 1966: this short novel is a masterpiece in exploring the central character Rachel's thoughts and feelings by means of first-person narrative cast in an interior monologue form which unfolds in a real-time present tense flow while also recording her dialogues with the other significant persons in her life. It is the story of 34-year old patently neurotic single woman who for years has found herself trapped in an unfulfilled life, living with her controlling mother and holding a teaching position at a primary school which falls far short of the professional fulfilment she should derive from it. Her life seems to start to turn around in her budding love relationship with Nick, but when it appears that he is married and she thinks she is pregnant it is on the point of complete collapse. Miraculously—when the growth in her body is only a benign tumour: is that a jest of God?—she recovers herself and makes a completely fresh start in her life. This is the least complex, both in its plot and in its emotional impact on me, of Laurence's novels I have read but it made for me a very compelling reading. I still want to read her very first novel, which is set in Africa: her short story, "The Rain-Child," which I read some time ago, makes me anticipate that it, too, will be very good.

When I return from my short trip to Toronto I will conclude what has been for me a most rewarding survey of the Canadian novel in its impressive development right from the early20th century. This will include an overall assessment of Margaret Atwood's achievement. I have read all her novels and she has become, by international reputation, the *grand dame* of Canadian literature and of the Canadian novel. With this, I may bring this journal to an end and (perhaps) ask Gerrit to put it on my website.

December 13

Back from Toronto. It was the first time in 21 months I flew to Toronto, and before I left I felt nervous about it. However, both flights went smoothly and I enjoyed my five-day stay in Toronto with Brian. It was good to see Baldwin and Lucy at their beautiful home and to partake of the 'echt nederlandse boerenkool met worst' dinner Lucy prepared. I.stayed largely away from political discussion because my views don't always mesh with Baldwin's and Lucy's. and I was not ready for a bout of argumentation. I really appreciated Baldwin's initiating me into the app Face-Time on his Ipad which allowed me to converse face-to-face with my four sisters: what a marvel of today's digital technology! I will therefore look into a getting a Smartphone. It was also good to meet Wendy and Adrian (Art) Helleman over coffee in a café close to Brian's apartment building. Wendy is my oldest friend, coming even before Brian, as she was a fellow student of mine in the U. of Toronto's graduate programme in Classics. I truly cherish their friendship, for they are thoroughly contemporary and socially conscious Christians and their decades-long history of teaching abroad as Christian scholars is fascinating; they can look back at some great accomplishments there..

So this afternoon it is off to the Acadia Library to return the four books I borrowed some time ago and pick up a few new ones—another of Grove's Prairie novels and another of Callaghan's novels—I was already lucky to find one of each in the used book store close to Brian's—and I will also see what the Library has of D;H. Lawrence's works I don't already have in my own. Later I will take out Chris to dinner, as my thank you for driving me to the Halifax Airport and picking me up there again.

December 14

Last night watched, courtesy of the Demand feature on my cable tv, the 1991 movie, *The Doors*, directed by Oliver Stone; Centered on the group's lead singer, Jim Morrison, it is a grim story of a fine musical talent destroyed by drugs and alcohol, in short by a devil-may-care attitude to one's physical and mental wellbeing, ending with Morrison's death of a heart attack in Paris at the age of 27. The increasingly orgiastic excesses of the concerts are captured with vivid and dramatic explicitness, explaining the movie 18+ years rating. What a stark contrast with the Beatles, who, in the midst of worldwide fame and adulation, basically kept their heads cool and clear as they continued to nurture their musical genius.

December 16

Yesterday I finished reading John le Carré's final novel, *Agent Running in the Field*. (I assume it is his final novel since it was published in 2019 and he died in December 2020.) I had always admired his novels but became a truly big fan of his post-Cold War works: I had found his earlier novels rather claustrophobic in their intellectual and emotional impact on me, but now their range in story and theme had greatly widened and each novel was a most enjoyable surprise for me; I was taken especially by his *Absolute Friends* and *A Most Wanted Man*. For me, these are impassioned, tragic novels, whereas I would characterize the 2019 novel as seriocomic. It is set right in the midst of the Trump and Brexit era and, in particular through the mindset of the first-person narrator, Nat, of British Intelligence, and the political tirades of his young partner in badmingt0n, Ed. it becomes the most specifically politically engaged of all the JLT novels I have read. The labyrinthic workings—the intrigues and the jockeying for power as well as the embarrassing failures—of British Intelligence are laid unsparingly laid bare; it is all superb satire. Ed gets himself into big trouble after he accidentally learns of an Anglo-American conspiracy to degrade the European Union and then, believing he is in contact with German Intelligence, is hooked by Russian Intelligence. British Intelligence pressures him to become a double agent if he wishes to avoid a hefty prison sentence and the ruin of his career. At the last moment, Nat and his supremely capable wife, Prue, acting very deliberately against 'the powers that be,' literally rescue him from an agonizing existential dilemma.

The first-person narrative, the dialogues, and the placing of milieu are dead-on sharp. JLC shows himself once more as a master of his craft as a novelist. I fully agree with the critics who rank him as one of the greatest novelists in the English language over the past several decades.

Next I will turn to the first of Frederick Grove's so-called Prairie novels, two more of Morley Callaghan's novels, and Margaret Laurence's first and so-called African novel. This will pretty well conclude my survey of the Canadian novel.

December 18

The setting and time-period of Frederick Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* is pretty well the same as those of his *Fruits of the Earth*, but whereas the latter has almost epic quality in its grand story of pioneer farmers—the story being centered above all on the larger-than-life Abe Spalding—wresting their harvests from a recalcitrant prairie soil on the edge of the Manitoba wilderness in the early 20th century while contending much of the time with drought, flooding, and the long, brutal winters, all of this toil is simply the background for the story of the novel I have just finished reading: the book's back cover has it right that it is a "psychological study on the realities of settler life in prairies" This psychological aspect is indeed very prominent in this the first of Grove's so-called Prairie novels. It manifests itself in the three interpersonal relationships in which the Swedish-born Niels Lindstedt recurs as the primary character, namely his relationship with Ellen Amundsen, the one with Clara Vogel, and that with Bobby Lund. The third-person narrator explores these relationships perspicaciously and in depth, and I was gripped by the tragedy that breaks out in the second, moved by the near-tragedy turning finally, however, to a happy resolution which is arrived at in the first, and delighted by the harmonious unfolding of the close friendship between Niels and Bobby in the third relationship.

In a traditionally styled novel with a third person narrator there is the danger that the narrator obtrudes too much with his or her own comments and judgments, whether positive or negative, on the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the novel's. characters. Only by privileging dialogue and interior monologue, whether direct or indirect—in the latter a character's inner life being still rendered in the third-person narratorial form—can this be avoided. The innovative novelists of past and present have managed this successfully. The narrator of Grove's novel often succumbs to the danger, but I think the reader can circumvent in his or her mind if they imagine, as I started to do as I approached the end of the novel that the narrator is, in fact Niels himself looking back on his life, from his sad, impoverished childhood in Sweden onwards. Finally I noted that that in the last few pages the narration switches to the present tense; the effect of immediacy and timelessness joined together and of the serenity of mood thereby achieved conforms beautifully to Niels's and Ellen's commitment in love to one another.

I heartily concur with Greg Hollingwood's praise (recorded on the back cover) that "*Settlers of the Marsh* is an outstanding achievement in the history of Canadian literary realism."

December 20

Such Is My Beloved (published in 1934 and, *like They Shall Inherit the Earth*, set in the Great Depression) demonstrates once more Morley Callaghan's ability to tackle questions of moral ambiguity and this in a distinct way which demonstrates a sense of life that is very much Catholic without being judgmental. This comes out not only in the unfolding of the novel's basic story, namely Father Dowling's increasingly obsessive and therefore increasingly unhealthy and indeed ethically wrongheaded compassion towards the streetwalkers Ronnie and Midge but also, albeit more subtly, in various dialogues and interactions involving Dowling, the two women, and a number of minor characters especially Lou, Charlie Stewart, Mr and Mrs Robison, and the Bishop; this subtle aspect is well brought out by Milton Wilson's Afterword in the New Canadian Library edition. Dowling ends up in an asylum set on a large lake, where he remains largely silent. There is no suggestion that he finds there a complete healing, but, even so, he attains to a sort of deep peace which affirms the intrinsic, almost cosmic goodness of his obsessional love and the "sacrifice"—as he increasingly has come to see it—of his life. "High in the sky three stars were out. His love suddenly seemed as those stars, as wide as the water and still flowing within him like the cold smooth waves still rolling on the shore."

The prose is spare, even minimalist; it has a distinctly Hemingwayesque quality, and I really took a liking to it. It works so much better here than a Faulknerian baroque would have.

December 22

Edward Norton is absolutely phenomenal in the movie, *American History X,* I watched last night thanks once again to the Demand feature of my cable tv. He is a Derek Vinyard, a young very articulate neo-Nazi who peppers his family and his gang mates with his white power rants—the story is set in the Los Angeles of the late 90's. Because he kills a young black who was trying to steal his car, he ends up in prison for a few years. There he is brutally traumatized by being raped by a bunch of blacks—this alone, I am sure, ensured the movie would get its 18+ year rating—but he is also befriended by another black, and when he leaves prison he has shed his

white power ideology and makes this very clear to his former mates and his family, and is successful in weaning his younger brother Daniel, who has always hero-worshipped him, from this destructive creed. The movie, however, comes to a truly tragic and shocking end when Daniel is shot and killed in a public bathroom by a young black man, and Derek is plunged into unspeakable grief. The viewer can only speculate what comes after.

December 24

Morley Callaghan's *The Many Coloured Coat*, which I just finished reading was published in 1960
and is set in a Montreal of an ambiance that clearly points to the late 1950's, just before the start of the
Quiet Revolution, and as such it is by far most individualized of the big cities in the author's novels
I have read: majestic, colourful, and most definitely entertaining but also with a belly of sleaze and the
underworld, the latter casting its big shadow on the sport of boxing, I must say that for me the climax
—the tragic climax—of the story came early with the suicide of Scotty Bowman; the bitter feud that followed between Harry Lane and Mike Kon was just the sorry aftermath. Here Hegel's dialectic
that in many a conflict both sides have Right on their side occurred to me. Mike finally takes the initiative in resolving the conflict by offering a firm apology in a court of justice, but even so, at the very end there is a strong note of a lack of resolution as Harry reflects on "the terror of innocence":
his innocence, even though he had engineered the disastrous investment deal that led to Scotty's destruction? Is Harry, formerly the charismatic and popular but now the fired director of public relations of a prominent distillery firm, still deluding himself?

December 26

Boxing Day or Second Christmas Day, as the Dutch call it. It was the first in several days when conditions, the weather and the state of the streets and sidewalks, were good for walking and so I gave
it well over an hour with a break for coffee and a donut at Tim's. I had two very good days with Glenn
at my place, with Christmas dinner yesterday, where we were joined by his elderly uncle Jack—95 years old! The nasi goreng I made with lots of turkey went over well, and there will probably be a reprise next Christmas. I now realize that I should have gone for at least a short walk yesterday, probably joined by Glenn, because by this morning I was feeling a bit cooped up: that daily walk has become over the years an essential part of my daily routine, good for both physical and mental health.

I am looking forward to finishing Margaret Lawrence's *This Side Jordan* later today; it is her first novel and draws on the years she spent in Africa and, for this novel, the time she lived and taught in Ghana. It is an impressive debut indeed. I'll elaborate tomorrow.

December 27

This Side Jordan reads like mature work of prose fiction; there is nothing tentative about its style and choice of subject matter; the latter may be summed up very broadly as the sense of life of individuals who fall into the category of the colonized or into its opposite, the colonized. On such a journey we are taken in a Ghana which is on the cusp of its independence in 1960. The story is focused on two couples, Nathaniel Amegbe and his wife Aya, and Johnnie Kestoe and his wife Miranda, Nathaniel faces the challenge of being an underpaid, underqualified teacher at a school for native boys which falls below government or church mission standards, and as such he is plagued with a perpetual sense of both professional and emotional insecurity and in addition torn between the pull of the British and Western way of life and that of his native Ghanian society and culture; the latter conflict creates in him a deep-seated sense of being fundamentally out of sorts which over and over again leads to miscommunication with Aya. Johnnie, coming from a severely impoverished Anglo-Irish background and having as a young boy witnessed his mother dying of an self-afflicted abortion, is torn by a fundamental anomie which is masked by a fierce professional ambition in the British import-export business in which he works as well as a flamboyant night life which he conceals from his wife. For both men and their wives, fortunately, the story ends on a strong note of a new beginning. For Nathaniel and Aya this comes with the birth of a son, their first child, and a new prospect for himself as a teacher as the hitherto grandstanding and clownish principal commits the school to a thorough upgrading of its standards in which Nathaniel will play a leading role. Johnnie and Miranda in turn rejoice over the birth of their first child, a girl, while Johnnie commits himself to the inevitable "Africanization" of the firm's Ghanian branch and with this commitment receives a major promotion.

Laurence's prose is richly alive in conveying the whole human sensorium, especially and not surprisingly that of the native culture—its sights, sounds, smells, tasting and touching—in which Aya is still deeply rooted and which also still clings to Nathaniel. This fact in particular made my reading a memorable experience. The narrator is third-person but the author uses interior dialogue, both direct and indirect, to superb effect. Lawrence is admirably even-handed in her portrayal of the realities of both British colonialism and the native Ghanian way of life; the latter is certainly less than idyllic, and while the former is bringing positive modernity, it too has its dark sides especially in its racist notions of white superiority. I was left with the hope that the best of both may come together in a new and creative synergy.

December 30

Got my booster shot today! It meant a long wait of four hours at the local walk-in clinic (at the Firehall on Commercial St) but it was worth getting the vaccine I might otherwise have had to wait for until the last week of January if I had made an appointment online or by phone. I managed to keep myself in reasonably physical and mental shape by resorting continually to stretching and knee bending exercises and quick 30-second walks. I experienced the kindness of two fellow waiters who offered me a ride home but, while thanking them profusely, decided to walk home, stopping on the way at Tims for a welcome coffee and doughnut.

January 2, 2022

When I made my choices of British authors and novels to read for the first or second time a few years ago in my reading project focused on the British, French, and German novel of the 19th and 20th centuries, I strangely omitted D.H. Lawrence, certainly one of the greatest novelists of the last century. who also made his mark in poetry and the short story. The only reason I can think of for this omission is that I had read, a long time ago, three of his major novels, *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and had a vivid recollection of them so that (as I probably reasoned) a second reading was unnecessary. That was a big mistake, so I am trying to make up for it with reading three of his other novels. I have just finished *The Plumed Serpent*, published in 1926, and have already started on *The White Peacock*, his first novel (1911) and then will turn to *Aaron's Rod*.

The Plumed Serpent is one of the strangest novels I have read, bizarre even although very compelling; in this respect it compares with Scott Symons's *Place d'Armes.*

The Plumed Serpent is set in the Mexico of the 1920's. Lawrence and his wife travelled there extensively during this period. Scott and I spent more than two weeks in Mexico in December 1985; Scott had already travelled in Mexico on his own, Since Scott was under the weather for while I did a lot of sightseeing by myself in Mexico City and surroundings including the massive remains of Teotihuacan, Although, of course, I was travelling in the 80's when 20th century modernity had become the dominant mode of most of life in Mexico, I think I am still in a good position to assess the overall accuracy of the picture of life in Mexico as depicted in the novel. Yes, most of the novel's descriptive detail—and there is so much of, overwhelmingly vivid and evocative indeed—strikes me as right-on authentic. However, I have consulted an excellent history of Mexico, provocatively titled, *Fire and Blood*, and I have to conclude that Lawrence's Mexico during this period is largely a fantasy: the supposedly historical events are fictitious and so are the leading personages, the generals, politicians, and spiritual leaders in a period when Mexico was still assimilating.the revolution which had convulsed the country in the previous decade.

Even though the novel has a third-person narrator we see Mexico largely through the eyes of the widowed, Irish-born Kate, who has left behind her mother and children in her native country and becomes increasingly caught up in the cultural revolution which, as the novel would have you believe, is sweeping her adopted country, namely the—at times violent—thrusting aside of the Roman Catholic church and religion and the re-embracing of the ancient religions of the Aztecs and the Mayas, so much more in harmony with the life of the body as mystically exalted by the narrator and eventually also by Kate. It also vehemently rejects American-style modernity compounded contradiction-wise of individualism and materialism, Kate becomes romantically involved with Ramon, the acclaimed spiritual leader, who in his own eyes embodies the god Quetzalcoatl and in whom I see in fact a bit of Nietzsche's Ubermensch, However, Kate marries, in grandly religious-ceremonial style, Cipriano, the general who like Ramon, identifies himself fundamentally with his pre-Columban, Amerindian rootss and thus presents himself as the

embodiment of the god Huitzilopochtl. After much hesitation, as she sees herself abandoning her autonomous womanhood, at the story's very end Kate decides to remain with Cipriano.

Not surprisingly, as my googling on this question has shown, *The Plumed Serpent* has received a mixed
reception: racist, misogynist, and fascist are some of the adjectives hurled at it. On reflection I myself prefer to regard it as a tour de force explorative work of fiction which one should not identify with the totality of what Lawrence, this most complex man, wrote and stood for. I do not read, therefore, this novel as a kind of ideological manifesto.

January 4

It took me a while to ger into the spirit of the *The White Peacock*, but eventually I was taken by its remarkable literary qualities—remarkable indeed for a first novel—and by this time I recognized that these qualities were bestowed by the first-person narrator, Cyril, whom I see as an alter ego for the author himself, even though this is not a strictly autobiographical novel. It is through his perceptive and luminous eyes that we are drawn into the characters of the novel, their relationship, the rural beauty of the Nethermere region, where most of the story takes place—the narrator describes its flora and fauna with extraordinary precision and abondance—and the coming and going of the seasons, while his gaze also comes to rest on the industrial squalor of the nearby coal mine and ironworks and the town servicing it, and later on moves to the bustle and glitter—albeit much disfigured by poverty and homelessness—of the megacity of London. Like his sister Lettie, Cyril is highly cultured but free of her quirky and haughty temper. His friendship with George, a young handsome but uneducated farmer, is tinged with what I do not hesitate to homoerotic love, enraptured as he is with George's manly physical beauty; this spirit of deep love emerges above all in the chapter, "A Form of Friendship," where after a strenuous workout of haying the two go for a swim and afterwards George rubs down Cyril with a towel, drawing his friend's naked body close to his: "…as if I were a child, or rather a woman he loved, and did not fear…I left myself quite limply in his hands…our love was perfect for a moment, more perfect than any love I have known since, either for man or woman." All this anticipates the scenes, including the famous wresting scene, in *Women il Love*, where Birkin strives to cement a relationship of manly love with Gerald—who, like George, becomes a tragic figure.

George slips gradually into becoming a tragic Hardyesque kind of character. Unsuccessful in his wooing of Lettie, he rejects his father's invitation to join him in immigrating to Canada; instead he marries and builds a family with Meg and reaches a fairly good level of material prosperity, but his heart is not with his family and indeed with his life as a whole and thus he turns increasingly to drink; we leave him at the end of the story in an advanced stage of alcoholism which will surely lead to a premature death.

Thanks to the narrator, the story moves on highly contrasting social and cultural levels. In one episode we are drawn into a picnic which is acted out by the participants as a pastoral gathering inspired by the *Idylls* of the Hellenistic poet Theocritus; and, very striking too, quotations from Latin and German literature enter at times the conversation. At the other end of the scale, the speech of uneducated rural folk is often rendered in dialect.

January 6

Aaron's Rod: a big disappointment; this novel goes nowhere, in my opinion. None of the characters who appear gained any real empathy from me. This applies especially to the central character, Aaron Sisson, the flautist—the flute is his "Rod." He abandons his wife and children in order to find his true self, not one defined by his relationship to his wife, Lottie, and so goes on futile quest in which he is befriended by Lilly, with the latter soon leaving for Italy and Sisson following him and eventually finding him in Florence, where at the end Lilly lectures Aaron on nurturing his "power-urge" rather than "love-urge." This pseudo-philosophizing is also indulged in by some of the other characters, especially Argyle. The most irritating aspect of the novel, however, is the third-person narrator who continually, in rather typical Victorian novel fashion, passes extraneous judgment, usually negative, and even indulges occasionally indulges in an aside to the reader, in the style of "dear reader."

The novel does come alive in its second half with a lot of good deal of local colour of Italy in the early 1920\s, especially the cities of Torino (a good guess of mine), Milan, and Florence; here, among others, he hangs out for a while with an obviously gay couple, Angus and Francis, and meets other eccentric personages as well.

I cannot help but think that Lawrence penned this novel tongue-in-cheek, so to speak, and expected the attentive reader to suspect this.

January 8
I decided some time ago already that I would close this journal on January 14, or very close to this date; since I made my first entry on January 15, 2020, it will have covered then exactly two years or nearly so, and Gerrit will put it on the attractive website he constructed for me in 2017. My journal has veered increasingly to a survey of the Canadian novel, from Saran Jeanette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904) to Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2020), with which I am about to conclude, so to end my journal at this point seems appropriate. I may start in due time another journal which will hew more consistently to the kind of reflection—topical, philosophical, theological etc.—which I had in mind for this journal, which, after all, bears the title of *Pensées*.

January 9

My survey of the Canadian novel as I illustrated it with short reviews of many dozens of novels has been inevitably selective, probably more so that would have been acceptable for an academic study; some of the authors and their novels I did not include are in fact in my own library. With the exception of Marie-Claire Blais and Michel Tremblay I omitted Francophone novels altogether.

I decided to leave a brief assessment of Margaret's novels until the very end. With her numerous and very diverse publications since the mid 1960's she is indeed the *grande dame* of English-language Canadian literature, in poetry, the novel, the short story, nonfiction, children's books, and most recently, the graphic novel; far more works authored by her are in my library than of

any other author, including all her novels, all her short stories, much of her nonfiction, and some of her poetry. Of her novels my assessments are bound to differ: my favourite is still *Alias Grace* (1996), a riveting story of a brutal murder in the Toronto of the mid-1800's; the tv miniseries based on it was also very good. Her most ingenious novel is, in my opinion, *Hag-Seed. The Tempest Revisited* (2016), a brilliant recasting of Shakespeare's play and placed in a contemporary Canadian setting. Atwood has written six what might be called dystopian futurist novels. *The Hand Maid's* Tale (1985) is too *outré* for me, and this also affected the movie that followed a few years later. I have not seen the lengthy tv series that came out fairly recently and is also available in dvd, of which I have one but have not watched it as yet; I have the impression, though, the story becomes too bloated in this adaptation. (I should mention in passing that her second novel, *Surfacing* (1972), which I very much enjoyed, received an excellent film adaptation, which I liked equally.) The recent sequel to *The Hand Maid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, has a much more believable, less horrific storyline, and as such I found it more accessible emotionally.

Her three dystopian novels that constitute what is sometimes called the *MaddAddam* triad tackle the mass destruction of the environment and its dire consequences for humanity. The first two novels are very good, especially the middle one, *The Year of the Flood*; the third with, among others, its wildly imaginative reaching out into grotesquely botched genetic engineering, baffled critics, and my response, too, is mixed. There is no doubt whatsoever, though, in my mind about Margaret Atwood's unparalleled achievement in Canadian literature with a career in publication and writing that now spans nearly six decades.

January 11-12

This is the final entry in my present journal: Chris will back it up for me and I will then send it to my brother. It is going to be a bit of a miscellany.

First of all, if and when I start a new journal I will give poetry a prominent place in it. I have just started to read for the second time in less than a decade William Wordsworth's majestic epic-length autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, its subtitle being *The Growth of a Poet's Mind*; in the first reading it made such a deep impression on me that I had to go back to it; I doubt there is anything like it in the English-speaking world, with Wordsworth tracing in lofty blank-verse poetry his maturation, from childhood onwards to adulthood, into a profound spirituality in which the love of Nature and the love of God are interfused. I was stirred by the sublime epiphany at the end where Wordsworth climbs and then at night-time reaches the top of Mount Snowdon, where the moonlit vistas of cloud and land and the murmuring sounds of unseen waters become for him "The perfect image of a mighty mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity…"

My journal records my reading of many impressive novels, but the greatest impact on me was made by a work of non-fiction, namely the journal—in its published form amounting to two sizable volumes—kept by Viktor Klemperer in which records how he, a Jew, and his gentile wife lived under and survived the Nazi regime in Germany for the full 12 years. Many of the episodes and details he recounts have remained crystal clear in my mind; I managed to read a bit of it in the original German, including the lengthy, harrowing account of the fire-bombing destruction of

Dresden in February 1945 which permitted Klemperer and his wife to escape from their immediate captivity. I owe a lot of thanks to Chris for calling this awesome work to my attention.

I had the occasion again a few days ago to experience the kindness of strangers when I phoned the local taxi service in order to make an apology for not having cancelled a taxi I had ordered==not having a cell phone—via the customer service desk at Walmart: a very late running bus to Wolfville had finally arrived, well before, I should note, before the taxi would have. The woman I talked with was most cheerful about what happened, saying that they were very busy that night and the driver would have immediately had a new customer. I had offered $20 in compensation but that was absolutely unnecessary.

Thanks to my visit with Baldwin and Lucy in Toronto last month, I have considered buying a smartphone, which, as Baldwin demonstrated to me by phoning all my four sisters, would allow me to communicate also face-to-face with anyone I phoned (Baldwin used a word-pad, which provided a much larger screen). After much thinking, however, I have decided against it: more gadgetry to have to take care of; the telephone and email are perfectly adequate for me—an old-style flip phone would be handy, though. For aa long time I have been heeding the thinking and warnings of Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Bluff*, which I have discussed in one of my online *Essays*.

In an earlier entry I brought up my being prone to cyclothymia, a mild form of the bipolar disorder. I noted then it was something I could keep well under control. I have found, though, that more recently, starting last fall, as the pandemic did not go away, it has been looming larger in my mind, especially its negative end, that is, depression coupled with some anxiety as well since I tend to get more unnerved by what are really only small annoyances and setbacks; many people nowadays today are going through this same negativity. It is not a severe condition and I manage it fairly well by keeping to a good daily routine and doing a bit of creative work, especially well -focused reading and keeping up my journal—with regard to the latter, therefore, while I am about to conclude this journal, I will keep written track of my reading and reflecting and may then eventually go back to keeping a journal.

With this state of mind it has been almost inevitable that I should go back to the fundamental question I posed at the very beginning of my journal: What is humanity, just a blip in the mighty maelstrom of insensate cosmic processes stretching over billions of years, or a unique vast collectivity of unique beings taken up by God in a Creative Evolution set in motion right from the beginning of the universe? I have reflected much on this question, greatly helped by three great Catholic thinkers, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Hans Kůng, and from all of this, I thank God, there continues to emerge from my heart, despite moments of doubt, an affirmation loud and clear that God is good and that His design for the cosmos and humanity in it, including my humble self, is truly awesome and good.