

Dear George,

You and I have unfinished business.

In 2006 I was the third juror for the George Ryga Literary Prize for Social Awareness in Literature which was organized by some of your Okanagan friends who explained they could not pay me but any time I wanted to spend a few days at the George Ryga Writers Centre (formerly your home) in Summerland, I was welcome. So, as I was driving back to Edmonton from Campbell River two years ago, I stopped over two days and nights. I had ample opportunity to look through your literary memorabilia and library – books, of course, theatre bills, souvenirs - and finally admitted that I have done you a disservice.

When we met you must have been about fifty. Back then, I thought you were already an old man– well, oldish – even though I sensed from your energy that you were at the peak of your moral and creative capacity while I still toiled on the slopes. And then quite suddenly you were dead, within the decade.

I have outlived you by twenty years so far. Now I am sleeping in your house in Summerland. It's the least I can do.

When I returned permanently to Alberta in the summer of 1975 to research my first book, I had already made a name for myself in Toronto magazines as a feisty feminist and alienated Albertan. (At home in Edmonton for a summer holiday, I was once featured in a film produced by friends at Barnyard Productions, “To Be Young, Gifted and Western Canadian,” a riff on Lorraine Hansberry’s triumph of Black consciousness, “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” – we had such cheek.) My book, *All of Baba’s Children*, was published early in 1978 and I was at once sought out as a writer with a point of view I would now call “ethnic with an attitude.” It was the hey-day of official multiculturalism, much of it with roots in prairie Ukrainian-Canadian community activism, left and right,

since the 1940s; of the theory and practice of regionalism in western arts and letters; and of the New Left's sympathies with and romance of working class heroes and farmer populists who suddenly seemed our forbears and we their legacy.

But when I was asked by George Melnyk, the editor of the newly-fledged monthly, *NeWest ReView*, to review books of fiction by the playwright George Ryga (reissued by Talon Books of Vancouver) I read you not through the lens of these affiliations – Alberta-bred Ukrainian-Canadian outside agitator – but through that equally urgent politics I had brought with me from Toronto, feminism, or, as we called it then, women's liberation. As I read your stories, gender trumped all other identities.

More than the content of the stories – in *Night Desk*, a wrestling promoter tells stories to a night desk clerk in a seedy hotel, in *Hungry Hills*, a misfit returns to the blasted heath of the family farm – I remember the emotions they roused in me: fury and loathing of the protagonist males placed centre stage for our admiration: swaggering, loutish, semi-literate, misogynist. Oh but working-class! I hated them. As I wrote my reviews, my hostility was further fuelled by your apparent obliviousness to the fact that such a marginalized masculine type, who spewed venom about “advertising executives” and “broads” (“What makes some women missionaries an' other hookers, do you know? Sometimes I think there's no difference,” to quote Romeo Kuchmir in *Night Desk*) in fact shared the privilege of men of all orders who fuck 'em and leave 'em (“I'm an outlaw, kid, a stallion. I'm goin' where I'm goin' an' no one asks me why”). You may have been ethnic, Albertan and working-class but feminism had given me permission to break solidarity with oppressed Ukrainian-Canadian males with nothing more to recommend them. The publisher of Talon Books asked Melnyk not to give me any more of your work to review.

Some weeks, or perhaps months, later, you phoned me at my home in Edmonton. You were in town, would I meet you for coffee, in the cafeteria of the “new” wing (since torn down) of the stately Macdonald Hotel . I think I remember being surprised by this bland choice of café but of our meeting itself I remember almost precisely nothing. Faux-rustic

tables and chairs, china coffee mugs, and the face of a man who resembled remarkably one of your photos – a shock of dark hair slightly disheveled, an emphatic mustache, the cantilevered cheekbones – but perhaps I am remembering the photograph.

I'm pretty sure I was expecting to be chewed up and must have had my feminist dukes up but what I do remember clearly is your rather bewildered expression as you said across the coffee cups: "Myrna, why are you so mad at me?" I have no recollection of my response.

We never met or spoke again. I never read more of your work. I never saw any version of the play that had the theatre world abuzz for quite awhile, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. I registered the fact of your too-early death. But I have never forgotten the fact of that brief meeting in Edmonton, and its meaning has come back to haunt me with all the poignancy of twenty-some years' worth of hindsight.

A cool wind has blown up from Lake Okanagan. Your neighbour's apple trees are in small but sweet blossom. On the other side of the house, a piece of your land has been lopped off and sold to a couple who sit outside their half-finished chalet in the tepid sunlight while the Stones' "Brown Sugar" comes blasting out of their boombox. I'm glad you're not here to witness this. I prowl the rooms, upstairs and down, trying to guess where you parked your typewriter, shelved your scripts, took your midday snooze (for you would have done that, I'm pretty sure, somnolent in the furnace of an Okanagan summer, fruit oozing sap in your garden, bees droning in the white gauze curtain of a bedroom). I cut stems of lilac (it's end of April) from the old bush near the door, a prairie bloom if I ever saw one (Baba's extravagant hedges around the garden) and go through each of the kitchen cupboards looking for a corkscrew and then just to keep looking.

To sleep in, I have chosen the bedroom off the living room with the large windows overlooking the front patio with a slit of a view down to the lake. I want the morning sun, such as it is. I lie against the pillows and regard a postcard stuck into the frame of a mirror, of miners in a Barkerville saloon, rattling their poker chips, placing their bets.

Maybe this wasn't a bedroom, maybe this is where you sat at your typewriter, maybe you'd like me to move out.

I look at everything on the walls. And on one of the broad living room walls I see the object which has provoked, so unexpectedly, this letter. It is a framed poster of the kind you see everywhere in small prairie towns, attached to community billboards, telephone posts, in the post office, in the vestibule of the coffee shop: "Auction sale, George Ryga of Richmond Park, who has sold his farm and is leaving the district." This is your father, Ryga Sr. The date of the auction is August 17 but there is no year mentioned, only the time of the clock: 1:00 pm sharp. You had long been gone from that unprepossessing farm and there had been no other sons to hand it on to. "Leaving the district..."

For sale: a Ford tractor in excellent condition, harrows and binders and swathers, hay rack and wheel wagons: tools of men's work, ready for an agricultural museum. From the house where you grew up: Aladdin lamps, cream cans, cuckoo clock, propane hot plate, propane brooder stoves (I have to look this up: "a device for warming chicks"): women's work aka collectibles. But also a 17 inch television set, "A1 shape," and I imagine the old folks seated solemnly before it, keeping loneliness at bay, after you had lit out for the territory, "with a cream cheque in my pocket and an oversized jacket on my back," as you wrote. They see you once or twice on the screen, being interviewed, perhaps on the occasion of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* at the Vancouver Playhouse (they must have wondered, as I do, how on earth you, from your perch in the Okanagan, knew how to write about the dreamtime of an Aboriginal woman sentenced to death in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside) or perhaps on the occasion of the cancellation of *Captives of the Faceless Drummer* when you dared to write a hostage drama, alluding to the events of the October Crisis and War Measures Act in 1970, to "explain the core of social breakdown," in obvious solidarity with the violated spirits of poor and despairing Québécois.

But on October 17 of an unnumbered year you have come back to NE-30-68-21, northeast of Athabasca across the river, half a mile north of Big Coolee Stores to give up

the parental green chesterfield and chair, the television set, and the four-year-old roan cow, “to calve in December,” to Frank Dulaska, auctioneer.

I have since reread those reviews I wrote. They’re not bad; you deserved them, as far as they go. About *Hungry Hills*, in which you trade in “absurdity, grotesquerie and impressionism,” I wrote that the novel is also “badly written. It’s been a long time since I last encountered characters about whom I couldn’t have cared less.” The protagonist, Snit Mandolin, “hardly ever emerges as more than a snotty punk” and, when he does speak, speaks in your voice as though you were a ventriloquist. I wrote that I wished you had written closer to “real experience” instead of from a “private nightmare” in which even the vividly-described impoverished prairie community is never given a name or location. As for *Night Desk*, which I found “puerile and offensive,” I charged the book with being “about morbidity and rape. There is nothing wrong with writing about morbidity and rape but if there’s no indication within the text of the novel that the author stands against these forces of death, then I must assume he is with them.”

But here is the disservice. In 1980, about the time you and I met, I was also the author of a book about the history of the 1960s in Canada, and of a stream of feminist journalism in the magazines, and I had some idea of who you, George Ryga, were. I knew you were a Ukrainian from a farm near Athabasca and that you wrote *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Your story should have struck me as remarkable – the physical hardship and poverty, the struggle to become an educated writer, the indissoluble kinship with the dispossessed - but I was unimpressed even without knowing the details. I was in the throes of feminist rage and it was my role to displace you with my higher, brighter, newer consciousness. You were only twelve years older than me but in my view you were an established male writer who didn’t know his time was up.

But now that I’ve outlived you, those twelve years’ difference have collapsed into a single perspective of fellow feeling.

When I was researching and writing my book about Ukrainian-Canadians in the town of Two Hills, some miles east of my grandparents' homestead quarter at Royal Park in the so-called Ukrainian bloc settlement of northeastern Alberta, I had only a vague idea that some Ukrainian immigrants such as your parents had arrived later in the history of prairie homesteading (my paternal grandfather arrived in 1900), had had to go farther afield for land, found it a hardscrabble living compared to cropping the black loam of Royal Park, and so had a story of their own. It wasn't pretty. And remains to this day excluded from the much-hyped romance of Ukrainian-Canadian toil and trouble amply rewarded by entry into the lower middle classes.

The Kostashes farmed prodigiously in the bloc settlement zone. The Kostashes built churches. All six Kostash brothers graduated with university degrees. You grew up poor northeast of Edmonton on a stingy piece of land. You and your father, also George, hated priests. Your dad belonged to the Canadian-Soviet Friendship Society. You quit the schoolroom at thirteen, "wayward in my head."

You were in formal school only seven years of your life, but the teachers of those years, "the Tkatchuks, the Staffords, the Kowalchuks," have the same significance as the ones you met later in your reading, "Byron, Keats, Shelley, Burns, Dickens," and for the rest of your education you had the farm, the countryside: the sour mud after a rainstorm, newly-split wood, horses' sweat, smoke and kerosene, and the cursing men – "the poverty was incredible" – who "beat their livestock and their women." But you drank in the warmth of it for "it was the life that was all-important." The people around you – the pool hall operator, the café waitress, blacksmith and grain elevator operator – all spoke in the accent you learned in turn. The strange world of the up-and-down strokes of the English alphabet would come in time, and then you would have the means to get out of the silence of illiteracy "enforced upon my forefathers by centuries of persecution at the hands of kings and barons and priests!" (Yes, always the priests. Old Lepa: "I came to Canada so I would never bend my knee to another man. For me the road to God was always blocked by a priest." We could talk about this, you and I, about my relations who built those damn churches in the "bloc settlement.")

My people even changed their name: in the Old Country we were Kostashchuk but no Anglo-Saxon could pronounce this, which may or may not make us craven brown-nosers to the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy who, as we have both pointed out, got away for a very long time with the notion that Canada was “built” exclusively by the Hudson’s Bay Company, the CPR and the Northwest Mounted Police. But that wasn’t your learning. You wrote: “Lord Strathcona drove one spike, all the rest was done by Mike...” a labour journalist wrote in one of the many periodicals that reached our home during my boyhood. And of all my education, these twelve words have been the most unforgettable.” You even take a poke at multiculturalism, that ideological manoeuvre of the lower middle classes who can see their chance for the next rung up: if you want to get ahead in Angloland, as you referred derisively to the Promised Land of multiculturalism, “never, never refer to the outrages of the past.” On the other hand, my maternal grandfather, who was literally a ditch-digger in Edmonton and who also read those Soviet Ukrainian magazines which extolled the achievements of the heroic working class of the revolutionary motherland, had two sons-in-law, both Bill: Bill the high school teacher (my dad) and Bill the carpenter (my uncle). To his dying (resentful?) day he addressed dad with the formal pronoun, *Vy*, and the carpenter as *Ty*. It’s the sort of social fact about us ethnics that drove you crazy.

But I’ve done my homework now, and understand something of the 35-year-long trajectory of a writer, a fellow Ukrainian, a man of the Left, a writer of unshakeable principle, lover of engagé poets met at world youth conferences behind the Iron Curtain. Now I hear the plurality of your voices: the “artist-in-resistance,” agitated in a speech in Thunder Bay 1982 at a populist theatre conference about the “quasi-colonialism” of the economy and culture in which Canadian artists are forced to operate, prescient about the “uneven exchange” of global communications; the craftsman of *Rita Joe*, a coup de théâtre which anticipated so much of what was going to happen in the next decade to home-grown theatre; the elegist, in your journal when you knew the malignancy was killing you, whose last entries were nevertheless exuberant: “The commitment and

conviction to the great forces changing the social landscape are as intact and joyful as they ever were.”

For all this commitment and conviction, you seem never to have fallen prey to a Socialist Realist agenda, although the temptation must have been great to dedicate your writing to the construction of the brave new world of soviet everywhere.

I too once yearned to be thought useful by revolutionary Central Committees of various tendencies. We could talk about that too, now, if we could have that coffee again in the Macdonald Hotel. And about how socialism has worked out, and capitalism too for that matter, in that quasi-colonialism which regulates all our lives, about “post-feminist” women and “metrosexual” men, about the array of stories of First Nations in our theatres, about the digitization of libraries and the meetings of writers no longer at your beloved international congresses but in Facebook. And we could talk about how we always believe the bad reviews.