

The Satirical Vision of Canadian/Scottish Songwriter, Poet, and Novelist Graeme Williamson

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Abstract: Graeme Williamson, best known as the lead singer/songwriter of the 1980s Toronto New Wave band Pukka Orchestra, was also a poet, short story writer, and novelist. Born and raised in Canada, he moved to Scotland after a serious illness, and his works reflect his personal experience in developing themes of travel, alienation, loss, and awareness of mortality, using biting satire, caustic wit, and a clear insight into the darker reaches of the human psyche. This paper will analyse several of Williamson's song lyrics, poems, short stories, and his novel, *Strange Faith*, to show how his writing presents a critical view of modern society.

Keywords:

Graeme Williamson,
Scottish literature,
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Kanadalı/İskoç Söz Yazarı, Şair ve Romancı Graeme Williamson'ın Hiciv Vizyonu

Öz: 1980'lerin Toronto New Wave grubu Pukka Orkestrası'nın baş solisti/söz yazarı olarak bilinen Graeme Williamson, aynı zamanda bir şair, kısa öykü yazarı ve romancıydı. Kanada'da doğup büyüyen Williamson, ciddi bir hastalıktan sonra İskoçya'ya taşınmıştır. Eserleri; keskin hiciv, yakıcı zekâ kullanarak ve insan ruhunun karanlık noktalarına ışık tutarak seyahat, yabancılaşma, kayıp ve ölüm bilinci gibi temaları işlediği kişisel deneyimlerini yansıtmaktadır. Bu makale, Williamson'ın modern topluma nasıl eleştirel bir bakış sunduğunu göstermek için ona ait şarkı sözlerini, şiirlerini, kısa öykülerini ve *Strange Faith* (Garip İnanç) romanını analiz edecektir.

Keywords:

Graeme Williamson,
İskoç edebiyatı,
Kanada kültürü,
şarkı sözleri,
Pukka Orkestrası,
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Introduction

Graeme Williamson (1948-2020) was born in Montreal, Canada, to a Canadian mother and a British father. From 1979 to 1988, he was the lead singer/songwriter of the Toronto-based New Wave band Pukka Orchestra, but when kidney and liver failure stopped him from performing, and the band's record company, Solid Gold, went bankrupt, he moved to Glasgow, Scotland, where he earned an MA from Glasgow University and an MLitt (with Distinction) in Creative Writing. Pukka Orchestra released two albums, *Pukka Orchestra* (1984), *Dear Harry* (1992) and a four-song EP (Extended Play recording), *The Palace of Memory* (1987). Williamson published a novel, *Strange Faith* (2001), several short stories, including "The Sixth Tier" (1973), "Memoirs of an Amnesiac" (1998), and "Nostalgia" (2004), and a posthumous collection of poems titled *naming the stones* (2021).

Throughout his career, a common theme in many of his works is the absurdity of modern life. The catchy melodies and humorous lyrics of the songs that he wrote for Pukka Orchestra, as in the love song to an inflatable sex doll, "Rubber Girl" (1984), combined with more serious themes, particularly the criticism of police brutality in their 1981 hit "Cherry Beach Express," earned the band commercial success and the CASBY award for Most Promising Band in 1985. His poetry and prose, however, are not as well known, although, in his later poetry and prose fiction, he developed these themes in more depth, in the same witty style that made Pukka Orchestra famous in Canada. Some of his works, such as *Strange Faith*, portray the travails of his protagonist as tragicomedy; in his short stories, the ordeals the characters endure are the stuff of black humour. Most of his poems, in contrast, deal seriously with themes of ageing, dementia, and encroaching death, although several (for example, "Frosty Morning") do contain examples of absurd humour. In both content and style, his poetry and prose works provide a challenging and enjoyable reading.

Canadian Literature and Cultural Amnesia

Throughout Williamson's works, there is a recurring theme of loss; many of his song lyrics describe broken relationships and the loss of human contact and love; many of his poems evoke the feeling of loss of relationships, as friends and loved ones are taken by old age, and the loss of mental powers associated with ageing; his short stories deal with senility, amnesia, and the breakdown of a decrepit society; and his novel, *Strange Faith*, combines all these motifs and adds the theme of the breakdown of human relationships, as well as loss of national and cultural identity.

The characters in Williamson's works move through the world much as their author did, experiencing physical and mental dislocation, attempting to discern meaning in chaos. These are common themes in Canadian literature, and it could be argued that the lives of Canadian fictional (and real) characters are symbolic of the geography of the country itself. In *Imagining Toronto*, York University geographer Amy Lavender Harris observed that Torontonians tend to suffer from "cultural amnesia" when it comes to their

writers. Harris explains what scholar Germaine Warkentin sees as the cause of this cultural amnesia as “connected to a city-building compulsion that has ‘destroyed and rebuilt, destroyed and rebuilt’ the city’s monuments as well as its memory in competition for colonial, corporate and cultural attention” (21):

A diagnosis of cultural amnesia would seem to explain why—in a city where nearly everybody seems to be a writer or aspired to be one, where books have their own festivals and television shows, where celebrity authors are jostled and fawned over in the street—books, no matter how enthusiastically they may be read, reviewed and rewarded when they are first published, soon slide irretrievably into oblivion like flotsam beneath a somnolent sea. (21)

It is a common experience of Torontonians who return to the city after several years’ absence to find themselves disoriented, looking around for landmarks that have disappeared in the interim. Harris shows how this physical change is reflected in the culture and builds an argument from the observation that Torontonian authors are reluctant to set their novels in the city, in part because any description of the cityscape is sure to be soon outdated. Drawing upon the writing of Warkentin and others, she argues that this is one cause of the cultural amnesia that results in Torontonians forgetting their artists as well. Aleksander Kustec describes how this happened to novelist and short story writer Mavis Gallant when she left Canada (81); Williamson’s fictional characters reflect how the same thing happened to their creator; his poetry and fiction have managed to slip under Canadians’ radar, although his work with Pukka Orchestra is still widely remembered and cited.

Song Lyrics: The Pukka Orchestra Era

Pukka Orchestra released 21 songs on two albums and an extended play disc.¹ The most well-known, “Cherry Beach Express,” written by Williamson and Tony Duggan-Smith, is a serious criticism of the Metropolitan Toronto Police force’s penchant for violence against minorities. The song opens with the lines

I got a bone to pick with you
Not so friendly boys in blue
When you come out of the station and into the street
Everybody beats a hasty retreat.

In an interview, Williamson explained why and how he wrote the song: “The subject matter of ‘Cherry Beach Express’ came about as a response to a spate of random assaults committed by the Toronto Police Force against some members of the public. In addition, the sharp-witted, rhythmic speech patterns and slang used in the city lent themselves to the creation of rock and roll lyrics.”² Williamson and Duggan-Smith’s criticism was so

¹ *Pukka Orchestra* (11); *Dear Harry* (10) -1 re-release +1 (“Goldmine in the Sky” on *The Palace of Memory*) = 21. The surviving members of the band are working on a new album of unreleased material (personal interviews with Tony Duggan-Smith and Iris Williamson 2022).

² Personal interview, 2020.

effective that the police force actually tried to have the song banned (Kennedy 78). Pukka Orchestra band member Tony Duggan-Smith recalls that “artists and the news media can shed light on many dire issues like the violence here [Toronto] back in the day but, more often than not, no one is going to do the hard work of actually bringing people to justice.”³ “Cherry Beach Express” was one of the first in a series of exposés of violence perpetrated by the Metropolitan Toronto Police that eventually led to hearings and court cases that brought justice to the victims (Brown; Wortley). Several newspapers and online magazine articles credit Pukka Orchestra with bringing the dirty secret of police brutality in Toronto into public awareness (Forsyth).

As well as songs that criticised Canadian society on a serious level, Pukka Orchestra wrote and performed songs that display an absurd sense of humour. “Rubber Girl” (1984) is a comic parody about sex toys that predated the beginning of the “incel” phenomenon, but even at the time, it had a deeper level of meaning.⁴ The “rubber girl” of the title is an inflatable sex doll; the speaker of the song has given up on finding love with a flesh and blood girl:

I'm gonna get me a rubber girl
I'm gonna take her everywhere
She's gonna give me a whole lot of love
In exchange for a little air.

Williamson’s sweet but sad lyrics used allusions that compared contemporary kinky practices to classical myth:

The tune had a very romantic feel to it, with a kind of waltz-like swing that appealed to me. At the time I’d become irritated with the banality of commercial love song lyrics, and I thought I could undermine the emotionality of my own tune with a more ironic lyric.

I don’t remember now why the inspiration for the lyrics came from the story of Pygmalion, but I must have come across the story by accident, of the sculptor/king who fell in love with a statue he had created himself. This seemed to epitomise the vanity and cynicism at the heart of some romantic work. I also wanted to emphasise the comic aspect of the lyrics to avoid accusations of pretentiousness. (Williamson, Interview)

Here, Williamson reveals a reflexive element to his writing (as well as the sometimes fortuitous sources of inspiration) that is present throughout his song lyrics, poetry, and fiction.

In an interview, Tony Duggan-Smith explained why the band chose to write about serious social and personal issues, rather than the more conventional topics usually addressed by commercial singer/songwriters:

³ Personal interview, 2020.

⁴ The term first appeared on a Canadian lonely-hearts website in 1993. “Incel” is a contraction of “involuntary celibate.” In recent years, the “incel movement” has instigated a series of mass murders targeting women (Hoffman et al. 565).

As a band we wanted songs that reflected real people's experience no matter what that might be. Like suicide in the song 'Power Cut' on the first album, which reflects on a guy who has spent his life living the way we are told we should live and the emptiness when at the end of your work life there is no golden handshake or blissful retirement, just a pocket watch with your name engraved on it.

In this vein, the lyrics of "Might as Well Be on Mars" (1984) ironically describe the doomed relationship of a couple who live an apparently enviable life in a city penthouse:

We lead such a sweet existence
But I'm reaching out to you in vain
You're disappearing in the distance
Of this alien terrain.

Although the couple in the song are financially comfortable, a vast rift between them is evident in the central metaphor of the song; an astronomical, unbridgeable divide between the speaker and the woman he is addressing, repeated in the refrain: "I might as well be on Mars / Only the stars mean anything to you / I'm already that far away from you."

Similarly, "Miss Right" (1984) is a darkly ironic satire on one of the western culture's central romantic myths. Romantic novels from Jane Austen to the present day, and much of consumer society and marketing, are based on the premise that Miss (or Mr.) Right will eventually appear for everyone, but in Williamson's lyric, "She don't exist."⁵ In her analysis of the myths of modern romance promulgated by soap operas and Harlequin novels, Tania Modleski builds upon the framework created by Roland Barthes for analysing aspects of modern culture in terms of mythology (34). It is this kind of modern myth, that happiness is found in love and relationships, as well as other myths that serve as the foundations of western society, such as that the police are there "to serve and protect," and that success and security are the natural results of hard work, that Williamson's songs and stories satirise.

Although Williamson's song lyrics for Pukka Orchestra are ironic, funny, and satirical, they reveal, as Duggan-Smith says, a serious concern for "real people's experience," including injustice, sadness, and loneliness. After leaving Pukka Orchestra, Williamson continued this quest to explore the depths of experience and emotion in modern life through his poetry and prose fiction.

Poems

One of Williamson's most often used literary devices is ironic inversion, which appears in many of the poems collected in the volume *naming the stones* (2021). In "Frosty Morning,"

⁵ In 2022, Ms. would be the acceptable title, but in 1984 Pukka Orchestra were criticising customs that were old-fashioned even at the time.

the first four lines unfold a series of images, like a haiku, creating a pattern of mental pictures evoking scenes of natural beauty:

Frosty morning
ice in the water-bowl,
the birds come to feed
after an absence for warm weather

The next four lines, however, contain a series of incongruous adjectives culminating in an absurd comparison that echoes, and parodies, W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" (1939) and Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917):

A blackbird, ungainly
in the rose bush
looks nonplussed, as if victim
of a bureaucratic mistake (65)

This dialogue with poets of previous generations places Williamson in the ongoing poetic conversation among Harold Bloom's "strong poets" (5) who build upon the works of earlier poets. The effect is comic, like the punch line of a joke. As John Morreal notes, "[t]his approach to joking is similar to techniques of stand-up comedians today. They speak of the set-up and the punch (line). The set-up is the first part of the joke: it creates the expectation. The punch (line) is the last part that violates that expectation. In the language of the Incongruity Theory, the joke's ending is incongruous with the beginning."

As with his song lyrics, Williamson's poems deal with serious, as well as comic, themes. There are thoughtful, and sometimes sardonic, themes in many of Williamson's poems, such as "Watching" (5), "Brushfire" (9-11), and "At my age" (33), which deal with the topics of ageing and insecurity; "When Not Paying Attention" (32) similarly focuses on the narrator's consciousness that time is passing; "The Nightmare of Betrayal" (13-14), "In the Green Wood" (15), "If I Remain" (16), and "Absence" (22) describe the realisation of encroaching death; "My black friend living" celebrates the life of a friend who is dying in a cancer ward (34). The consciousness of mortality is the theme of "Travelling" (36), in which life is compared to a journey: "I have no idea how long life is"; "I used to see the point in sorrow" (42) expresses regret at the passing of loved ones; "The Man Who Was All Shadow" (7-8), like *Strange Faith* and "Might as Well be on Mars," focuses on the loneliness of the protagonist, and "No Way Home" (40) on the feelings of alienation of an emigrant. A longer poem, "Rose Hall" (17), combines the themes of love of life, the consciousness of mortality, and criticism of human ignorance and injustice.

Many of Williamson's poems, like "Frosty Morning" (65), anthropomorphise animals and insects to comment on the oddities of human nature and society. The absurdity of human life is shown from an unusual perspective in "The Cockroach Cathedral" (18-19), which recalls Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915); both describe human life as seen through the eyes of a cockroach: "Cut me in half, with four hearts /

there in nothing I cannot endure." The central theme of the poem, expressed in the words of the cockroach narrator, is mortality and perseverance:

I will avoid the sticky boxes where my friends expire
lured by your cunning sweetness
I am immune to your sweetness –
This is the extent of my wisdom.

This trope is also similar to the distancing in the much-anthologised "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" by Craig Raine (1979), in which ordinary items are described from the perspective of an alien.

A similar example of anthropomorphisation appears in Williamson's "Sheep":

There is a rumour among sheep
that those kind men who send
the dogs to play with them on the hillside,
are eating their children.

"Such an idea is unthinkable,"
the wise sheep say,
"It is only our wool the men
are after."

And to account for the endless
disappearance of their
young they explain:

"The kind men have sent them
to boarding school!" (20)

"Sheep" is a sardonic beast fable in which the personified sheep rationalise the reality of their lives to avoid facing the horror of the real explanation, that the "kind men" are, in fact, eating their children; the implication is, of course, that this is a very human response to inconvenient truths, with a play on the word "sheep," which is currently used as an insult by both sides of the political spectrum to demean their adversaries.

In "Game of Ants" (37), ants are anthropomorphised; as an updated version of the fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper," it mentions grasshoppers and violins, and the penultimate stanza echoes the moral of the ancient fable: "the children of necessity keep warm / and laugh last." Williamson twists the old story, however, with the final, ironic couplet, "what a history / of hollow victory." As in the Pukka Orchestra song, "Might as Well Be on Mars" (1984), safety and security are not everything in life; without joy and play, life is not worth living. In a related use of animal symbolism, the poem "One morning the decree went out from the palace" (50) uses an extended metaphor to show that minorities in society are treated like dogs.

Other poems in *naming the stones* use sophisticated metaphors and symbols to convey the emotions aroused by shifts in perception caused by the decline in visual acuity

and cognitive impairment resulting from old age. In "Loch Voil 1" (21), appearance is interpreted as reality, which in turn is superseded by the imagination. The first stanza describes a vision:

The full moon brings to light
diamonds on the road
and a great ghost sleeping
in the sky

which is then construed, in the next couplet, as "The ghost is only a mountain / the diamonds only frost." The speaker then goes on to draw a parallel between his perception of the outer world and his inner life:

Nevertheless, as the clouds
drift on Loch Voil
I am haunted
and the diamond of the world
melts in my hands.

In "Brendel Plays Mozart" (27) there is an ironic inversion in which heaven and hell are superimposed: "Joy begins in hell," "And heaven / which can never quite be reached / turns away coldly." In "Thibaudet plays jeux d'eau" (28), there is an oxymoron in the simile "contentedly drowning" which is reinforced by the juxtaposed imagery of "hands quick," "heart languid."

Several of Williamson's poems in this collection are self-reflexive and metapoetic, as he meditates on the activity of being a poet; in "At my age" (33), the speaker, even as he laments his loss of sensory acuity, still expresses insecurity about his ability:

If I were really a poet
I could snatch life from thin air
and conjure up palaces
rivers and miraculous women.

The images in the last three lines echo Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"; the first, Coleridge's account in the 1816 preface of the poem's being incomplete.

On the other hand, in "days of rain," Williamson proclaims the necessity of trying to create art, considering the alternative: "It isn't necessary to be silent / it is necessary to speak (in the end only the false will be forgotten)." The poem continues with symbols that emphasise the necessity of creating art for the poet's personal life: "bring your fire to the feast / or the first ice of a long age / may form on your reticence" (35), lines reminiscent of Dylan Thomas's exhortation to live life to the fullest, to the very end, in "Do not go gentle into that good night" (239).

"No-one respects the great poets" is both a meditation on fame and a sly dig at the institution of the literary canon: "No-one respects the great poets / these ones make the mistake / of Still Being Alive" (46). Like many artists, Williamson laments that most

people don't know the difference between good and bad art without having someone to tell them.

Finally, "Small Mercies" (48) is based on a theme that recurs throughout Williamson's works, the insignificance of the individual in an uncaring world:

for just a moment
you can relax
safe, relieved in the knowledge
that the show really will go on
without you.

There is a kind of ironic relief in this realisation, somewhat like that of the speaker in Stevie Smith's "Thoughts about the Person from Porlock" (1962) who says:

I am hungry to be interrupted
For ever and ever amen
O Person from Porlock come quickly
And bring my thoughts to an end. (87)

Williamson's poems, like his song lyrics, combine a sharp, incisive view of the world with a deep interior mediation on what it means to try to live in it. Though working partly outside the genre of poetry, on the cultural margin, and between two rival national literatures, he nevertheless plays one instrument in the orchestra that is modern poetry and deserves to be better known.

Short Stories

Williamson uses techniques in his prose works similar to those in his song lyrics and poems to develop themes of ageing, loss and the absurd nature of life in the modern world, but in his short stories, he delves even deeper into the strange and frightening inner world of the deteriorating mind. While his poetry tends to be serious and introspective, his short stories reveal the surreal layers of ordinary life. As Katja Težak observes, "[h]is stories are a kind of mind-boggling maze and they force readers to go on a psychedelic trip of figuring out what is actually going on and where it is actually going on. Do they simply reflect the confusion of existence we all sometimes seem to encounter but are trying to forget at the same time?" (118).

Two of Williamson's short stories, "Nostalgia" (2004) and "Memoirs of An Amnesiac" (1988), vividly describe the experience of succumbing to senile dementia: in "Nostalgia," the narrator, while out for a walk, meets a strange man who follows him home and settles in while the narrator wonders whether he has, in fact, come face-to-face with his doppelgänger; however, at this stage of his life, he is no longer interested in finding out why: "I cannot fathom why neither Dora nor I have asked him what he is doing here. It is as if we are party to a long-standing agreement that no matter how strange things are, we will accept them unquestioningly." In the end, the narrator decides to leave his wife and home and let the stranger take his place:

I am hurrying to relinquish my attachments. When I get to the lights, I may not become content, but at least I won't have left any grief behind me, and that's an accomplishment in itself, surely. I've had that life, so there's no need to go back. All will be well, I'm convinced of it. Dora can drink a toast to me from time to time, and Leonard can do the cooking for both of them. ("Nostalgia")

In "Memoirs of an Amnesiac," the protagonist, a man named McNab, is progressively losing his memory, so he hits upon the idea of keeping a notebook in which he writes reminders to himself. As his condition worsens, he is provided with a caregiver, a young woman named Jennifer, who finds the notebooks so fascinating that she suggests he publish them. He agrees, but by the end of the story he has forgotten all about the notebooks:

When *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* was published anonymously three years later, the literary world was divided in its judgement of the book, and there was some speculation as to the identity of the author. McNab was unaware of the existence of his autobiography, but by this time he had forgotten almost everything that had ever happened to him, as well as his own name, which he forgot every night when he went to sleep. ("Memoirs")

A third, "The Sixth Tier" (1973), is set in a Kafkaesque world in which a faceless bureaucracy has decreed that citizens be evicted from their homes and relocated to tiers of park benches on which they are left to fend for themselves. The narrator's dehumanisation is complete when at the end of the story he matter-of-factly reports:

In my new environment altruism is rarely appreciated and can even prove dangerous, particularly as many of the residents have gone without food for days. Soon after my arrival I experienced an attempt at coercion from the lady who occupied the seat to the left of me. On several occasions I was obliged to physically restrain her attempts to deprive me of my vouchers. I believe her desperation arose out of concern for her three young children. The lady in question, however, threw herself from the bench one evening and disappeared into the crowd below. As she never returned to her place, which was in fact occupied the following morning by an elderly gentleman, I can only presume her attempt at suicide met with success. ("Sixth")

The common theme in all these stories is the essential meaninglessness of life, other than the experience of it as it is lived. Success, material possessions, fame, literary achievement, and even love, are worth nothing in the end when all these material and emotional victories are forgotten. Unlike the speakers in several of his poems, the protagonists of all three stories basically give up on life in the end. This is one symbolic manifestation of the "cultural amnesia" so pervasive in Canadian writing. It is this theme, the question of what it is that makes life worth living, that Williamson explored most fully in his longest work, the novel *Strange Faith*.

Strange Faith

Strange Faith (2001) is a coming-of-age novel that follows the journey of a young Scotsman named Martin Murdoch (10) who struggles to discover his identity and the

meaning of life in Scotland and in the second part of the novel, Canada. Martin's adventures develop the themes of exile and immigration, and Williamson's treatment of the two locations, both physical and imagined, creates a slippage between national literatures, augmented by allusions within the novel to works of both Scottish and North American literatures.

The title of the novel refers on a basic level to a belief system developed by Martin's uncle, Melibee Robertson, who operates an Institute of "contemplation practice" devoted to the "Realization of Natural Ephemera" meant to "reclaim the True Human Heritage" (37). Melibee invites Martin to join him in the Institute, but Martin demurs and chooses to try a new life in Canada instead, where, after a series of unfortunate events, he develops his own life philosophy. The novel is written in a post-modernist style, with the narrative voice shared between a third-person account of Martin's Quixotic quest interspersed with the epistolary voice of Melibee in stories, letters, and journal entries, which provide flashbacks to the time before Martin was born; Melibee, always on the verge of mental breakdown, is, however, a questionable if not unreliable narrator. A musician in his youth, Melibee, after expressing a preference for popular, instead of classical, music, was sent away to sea by his strict and wealthy father. After losing several fingers to frostbite following a botched suicide attempt, Melibee returned to Scotland and, his musical career over, began a new-age religious cult. From the preface, a bleak and fantastic story about cannibalism authored by Melibee, and several letters to Martin throughout the novel, Melibee is presented as a second narrator and a foil to Martin, who learns life lessons from his half-mad uncle's example.

The narrative begins just after Martin has left school and is living in the streets of Edinburgh after having been turned out of his home, where he lived with Melibee and his widowed mother, Alberta, for stealing money for drugs. After the suicide of Martin's father, Alberta has withdrawn into herself, leaving him effectively on his own.

In the first chapter, Martin has just lost his part-time job in a petrol station for allegedly short-changing a customer, and with his friends, Ray, Danny, and Christine, depends for food and clothing on Carole, who has a knack for shoplifting. On the way home after a night out at a club, they are beset by a gang of hooligans. As they run to escape, Martin is separated from Christine, with whom he now has the beginnings of a romantic relationship, and she is caught by the gang and threatened with rape. Hiding behind a wall, Martin is afraid to intervene, but Christine escapes by lying to the gang, telling them she is pregnant. After this event, Christine ghosts Martin.

Seeing no future for himself in Scotland, Martin decides to go to Canada, after Melibee offers to pay his plane fare. Melibee and Alberta had been there but didn't settle. In Toronto, Martin finds part-time work in a warehouse, then meets artist/stripper Maggie, who rejects his romantic (but not sexual) advances but introduces him to her father Wesley, a cabinetmaker who is also from Scotland. Wesley gets Martin a job with his employer, Bebe, the crooked owner of a furniture restoring business. Maggie's art

show is a success and she receives an offer to exhibit it in Vancouver.⁶ Martin decides to follow her and hitchhikes across Canada, but he is unsuccessful in his quest to find her and returns to Toronto, this time hitchhiking across the United States while reading a copy of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (1957) given to him by Christine (42, 174, 202).⁷ On his return, Martin and Wesley become close friends, but years of inhaling chemical solvents on the job have destroyed Wesley's health and he dies in hospital; with his last words, he tells Martin to go to his apartment and keep half of what he finds there, and send the other half to his old friend, Fred.

With his half of Wesley's \$12,000, Martin returns to Edinburgh and finds Melibee old and broken, his Institute abandoned, and his friends Ray, Danny, and Christine gone. He asks Carole, now living alone with Ray's baby, to come to Canada with him, but she refuses. In the penultimate chapter he has an epiphany similar to the narrator's in James Joyce's short story "Araby" (1914):

As he walked back to Taigh nan Òran he thought about how he had lost something, some kind of acuity in his senses, as if he had been invaded by dullness and now every moment that passed was slightly wasted; not that the world's magic had vanished completely, but that because of laziness, or some sort of affliction, everything had become a little too rapid for his sluggish senses to grasp. He stopped abruptly outside a hotel on Princes Street, causing a pedestrian collision behind him, struck by a terrible sense of dismay. (264)

The loss of acuity in the senses we have seen before in Williamson's poems and short stories, where it happens to old men suffering from senile dementia, but here it is happening to Martin, still a teenager, as a result of trauma. In the last chapter, after Melibee's death, Martin returns to Canada and renews his quest for experience, hitchhiking across Canada once more.

The violence in the scene of the attempted rape of Christine is reminiscent of several similar scenes in *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess (1962), while the scenes of drug-taking in Ray's squalid flat recall passages in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993). Martin is an existential hero; bored in school, he has no ambition and little interest in anything. He notes that his mother, Alberta, is autistic and turned inward when his father died, and wonders if he has inherited the condition. Several of the other characters comment on his passivity. This passivity, the inability to respond to events around him, is depicted in his difficulty connecting to others, a result of not knowing how to act in new situations, and it comes down to a question of choice when faced with the necessity to make decisions. Martin fully realises the consequences of his actions and inactions,

⁶ Maggie names her exhibition "The Cockroach Cathedral" (193), which is also the title of one of the poems in *naming the stones* (18).

⁷ While hitchhiking across the Canadian prairies, Martin is advised several times "you'll never get out of Brandon" (219, 220). Williamson's soon-to-be released song "Brandon" contains the refrain, "You'll never get out of Brandon" (personal interview, Iris Williamson).

however, and the dilemmas he creates for himself illustrate the core problem facing modern humans, as outlined by Jean-Paul Sartre in "Existentialism is a Humanism":

Quietism is the attitude of people who say, "let others do what I cannot do." The doctrine I am presenting before you is precisely the opposite of this, since it declares that there is no reality except in action. It goes further, indeed, and adds, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is." (36-37)

Martin's quest in search of self, then, involves experiencing life as a series of actions for which he takes responsibility, as he explains to Carole when he describes the scene in which he abandoned Christine to the thugs: "I never thought I would let anyone down like that," to which she laconically replies "Aye, well" and changes the subject (258). On several occasions, Martin questions the results of his choices, undergoing the "anguish" that Sartre describes as the responsibility that comes with freedom: "the anguish we are concerned with is not the kind that could lead to quietism or inaction. It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind experienced by all who have borne responsibilities" (27).

Another notable series of actions on Martin's part that follow Sartre's prescription for finding a meaning in life is his progressive abandonment of personal possessions, including a watch gifted to him by Melibee and a hat given to him by Maggie. Sartre says:

Before there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self.

In the second place, this theory alone is compatible with the dignity of man, it is the only one which does not make man into an object. All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man including oneself as an object – that is, as a set of pre-determined reactions, in no way different from the patterns of qualities and phenomena which constitute a table, or a chair or a stone. (40-41)

In the end, by choosing to return to Canada alone, Martin exercises the freedom that, according to Sartre, is what gives life meaning: "Life itself is nothing until it is lived, it is we who give it meaning, and value is nothing more than the meaning that we give it" (51).

Conclusion

Graeme Williamson was, of necessity, a creative artist in many genres. Despite major setbacks in his career, including the bankruptcy of his record company, Solid Gold Records, and major health problems just as Pukka Orchestra were achieving nationwide success in Canada, he persevered in his artistic endeavours and extended his generic range far beyond popular song lyrics. Coping with these difficulties contributed to a stoic acceptance of life's fragility, which is reflected in the major themes running throughout his works: acceptance of obstacles, and a determination to find meaning and beauty in life

on one's own terms. His works, while containing deeply philosophical themes, are at the same time witty and entertaining, revealing through humour and dramatic irony the many contradictions that life in the modern world presents. Despite having left Canada in the middle of his writing career, and effectively dropping from public view in his native land, Williamson continued, as did Mavis Gallant, to create literary works that focus on the Canadian experience. Like Gallant, who was ignored in Canada for many years before being finally recognised as a major author (Kustec 81), he deserves to be read as an important literary figure in both Canada and abroad.

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