

A Memoir of *Progress*

In 2005 my eldest daughter was born and I worked at the University of British Columbia in downtown Vancouver with Michael V. Smith. That was the year my first book of poems was published and Smith was working on his second novel about [the flooding of six villages](#) during the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway. Smith grew up in Cornwall and the lost villages are part of the folk memory of his childhood. We talked about this project often in those days. We talked about literature and art and politics every day at work. Eventually, that project became the novel, *Progress*, Smith's fourth book published in the spring of 2011 (in addition to his first novel, *Cumberland*, he also has a book of [poems](#) and [a collaborative art book](#) with photographer, David Ellingsen). The year before the novel was published Smith sent me the nearly final draft of the manuscript. I read it in a couple of days and we had several long conversations about the compositional state of the novel, Smith's remaining doubts, and what we each individually saw as the strengths and weaknesses of both Smith's conception of the book and his writing of it. I was excited by the book. I was excited by Smith's narrative and the simplicity and directness of his writing. I was also excited by what I saw as potentials of emotional, social, and political commentary that I hoped the last months of drafting would sharpen into a devastating moral expression. I hoped, though I don't think I said it in these words to him, that Smith could muster the cruelty to write the book to the menacing conclusion I envisioned. Wisely, Smith wrote to the menacing conclusion he envisioned.

The inciting incident of *Progress* is an industrial accident witnessed by Helen, one of the novel's two protagonists. From a grassy clearing at the edge of the river, a week before the flooding of her village is scheduled to occur, Helen sees a man fall from the power dam under construction. His body goes unrecovered and from the circumstantial evidence she gathers, Helen concludes the accident and its outcome are actively covered up by the Power Authority so as not to delay the massive hydroelectric project.¹ Writing for the [Globe and Mail](#), Lynda Grace Philippsen has called the industrial accident plot device absurd, claiming "the aftermath of that type of accident simply could not happen the way Smith writes it." And she's right, it is absurd. But not because it couldn't happen but because it very terribly could. The history of industry and labour in the twentieth century is so rife with [murder](#), [betrayal](#), and the [advancement of industrial interests](#) over the rights and safety of workers that almost any kind of crime in the interests of power (and progress) is conceivable.

Helen believes the body has been left in the dam and covered over by concrete. Perhaps Philippsen's sense of the impossible stems from some unrevealed knowledge of engineering that makes this scenario highly unlikely--I say "unlikely" because it is clearly "possible" no matter how ill-conceived it would be structurally or otherwise. Nevertheless, Philippsen doesn't seem to realize that what activates Helen is what Helen believes happened not what actually happened. The "impossibility" of the scenario is not relevant. One of the dramatic and thematic insights of the book is that belief matters more in the realm of action than historical or empirical objectivity. Helen uses her belief as leverage against what Cruikshank, the Power Authority executive,

¹ It's worth noting that the flooding in the novel is not exactly the historical flooding of the St. Lawrence Seaway nor are the villages about to be lost in the novel the historical "lost villages." In fact, both geography and time have been generalized into an *everywhere* and *anytime* of the last half of the twentieth century. There are elements such as cell phones that seem to attest to a later, still more contemporary, period but these elements are only exceptions that serve to remind us that this story happens as much in this century as it does in the last.

believes. What is revealed by Cruikshank's reaction to Helen (I won't give away too many details of the plot just yet) are not the details of a particular crime but the institutional guilt of those driving "progress." Philippsen argues that Smith's book fails because it does not "resolve" this incident in the plot. But neither *Progress* nor "progress" is about resolution. Smith's novel is morally and politically biting and devastatingly bleak. The lack of resolution to the incident on the dam is not an oversight. It is Smith's wise and cruel commentary on the value of the individual and the individual incident in the context of capitalist adventure.

Last spring, when my third book of poems was published, Smith and I toured part of central Canada together reading antiphonally from our respective books. Since then, I've been engaged in a novel project of my own that involves, among other things, the labour activist, Ginger Goodwin, and [the Great Strike of 1912-1914](#) in the coal fields of Vancouver Island. Like the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway for Smith, this is history that lives in the folk memory of my childhood on Vancouver Island.² This spring as I've written my way deeper into the story I hope to tell, I've found myself thinking back to those early conversations with Smith about his novel and to the novel he finally produced. I can hear Smith over my shoulder talking about his craft practice, how he composes scenes and how he develops narrative and symbols over the course of a novel. I am lucky to have been an intimate at various stages of his compositional process. I am lucky for the coaching that experience provides me now as I struggle with my own project but also because it has provided me the opportunity to consider over the course of seven years, Smith's vision in this novel. It is a courageously brutal vision.³

Helen is not able to stop the flooding of her village and the relocation of her family's graves. The victory she does achieve (I won't entirely spoil it here but it involves the graves) is acutely personal and without any consequence to her enemies--Cruikshank suffers a mild "slap in the face," to borrow Helen's term, that in no way puts the final outcome in doubt. It is such a meaningless victory in the scheme of things--in the scheme of the environmental, political, economic, social, and historical dispossession experienced by the villagers--that I hesitate to call it pyrrhic because defeat is not its consequence but its predicate: it is the tiny personal victory that can be carved out only once all other terms have been conceded.

If this were a story only about the victories of the powerful over the powerless it would be, as Philippsen claims, a cliché. But the vision is far more insidious and dark than that and a great deal of what makes it insidious is the clarity and directness of Smith's style. Here are the final sentences:

Robert looked around them, then up to the sky, wishing for something to prove what they had done was right, but everything was the same. The sky was the same. This had to be good enough.

² In both cases, the Seaway and the coal fields, the folk memory is truly held by everyone who lives or has lived in these places.

³ If I intended this to be more than a brief memoir of my experience with Michael V. Smith's novel, I'd quote from it extensively and I'd address the story of the book's other protagonist, Robert. If this is was meant to be a critical review I would have declined due to conflict of interest. Often writer friends talk intimately with each other about their work. Rarely do we share that publicly. Yet as intimates of each other's work, we are often in a position to offer valuable consideration of that work. That is my only intent here.

It is striking that in a novel about progress the final sentences declare a moral stasis. The language here is plain, and despite Robert's longing for solace, extremely calm. It is the normalcy of the language that highlights the truly terrifying realization that in fact nothing has changed and the characters have absolutely no idea what to do about it. The language is completely normal and therefore politically terrifying.

This is the real tragedy of *Progress*: Helen uses her small wedge of power against Cruikshank for her own personal benefit. Whether that outcome is a result of her inability to mobilize the solidarity of her village or whether that is because she lacks the political imagination, the fact remains that what she finds available to her as an act of resistance resides precisely within the categories permitted by the powers that oppress and dispossess her and in this way her act cannot manifest change. The epigraph of *Progress* quotes John Berger. The struggle, he says, between capitalism and socialism in the Twentieth-Century was, "at an ideological level, a fight about the content of progress." Brutally and despairingly, the content of Helen's resistance remains categorically individual. She is ultimately dispossessed of even the terms and categories of resistance. This is a terrible, dark vision. And far from impossible or implausible, I think Smith's book offers a profoundly honest assessment of the reality of our North American lives. That I live in a world where artists like Smith can still reveal the reality of our predicament is one of the few thoughts that gives me hope.

Matt Rader's latest story, [The Selected Kid Curry](#), reimagines episodes in the life of notorious outlaw, Henry Wagner, who was executed in Nanaimo, BC in 1913.