

Anatomy of a Dead Shark:

Jeff Bursey's *Verbatim* performs an incisive autopsy on the corpse of partisan politics

David Hallett

The film is *Annie Hall*. Woody Allen's alter ego is Alvy Singer. And Alvy and Annie have reached the point of admitting that their relationship is over. Alvy speaks: "A relationship, I think, is ... is like a shark, you know, it has to constantly move forward or it dies...and...uh...I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark."

The relationship in Mr. Bursey's novel is not an interpersonal one; it is the relationship between partisan political government and the body politic, the electorate, the governed. To call the relationship moribund would be a significant understatement of the novel's thesis. In *Verbatim*, partisan politics occupies the position ascribed by Monty Python's John Cleese to the notorious "ex-parrot": "It's a stiff. Bereft of life...If you hadn't nailed it to the perch it would be pushing up the daisies."

Verbatim shows a system of government still 'nailed to the perch,' or, to cite another Python sketch, if not completely dead, it was definitely "coughing up blood last night." As a former leader of a provincial party in Newfoundland once said to me, "This is the House. This is where grown men come to act like children and run the province."

Much in the manner of American "nay-

saying" authors such as William Gaddis and Flannery O'Connor, Mr. Bursey does not preach or prescribe an alternative to parliamentary childishness. He shows with unfortunately unerring accuracy that "there has to be something better than what we have," and leaves the challenge to each individual reader to perform an independent investigation of other, more efficient administrative orders. The reader must ask: "What is missing?" and "What's wrong with this picture?" What is missing is any sense of fair and balanced consultation, woefully epitomized in the person of Independent People's Party member Geneen Porter, perennially denied leave to speak to the issues debated in the House, by both (eventually all) partisan sides. What's wrong is (among other things) the complete absence of detachment from the personal elements of any issue of governance, demonstrated repeatedly by the utter incapacity of the participants in the partisan system to stop making denigration of the other party the principal focus of most speeches.

From the epigraph, the tone is clear: this work of fiction is not primarily satirical, but realistic. The government, which is, truly, the novel's protagonist, is also its own worst antagonist. In Walt Kelly's