editorial

BRYAN, BOOKS, & BARRICADES

WHEN *Quill & Quire* was advertising the forthcoming books of 1991, the editors called the publication list "A Season for Sure Things." Atwood, Davies: the list was made up of certain sellers. And they did sell, even though the economic climate was not so sure, which is of course why the list was so conservative. For businesses folded; markets dried up; "security" became the watchword of the industrial imagination—likely with the survival of existing industrial power in mind: with a clear desire to market familiar names and products, but paradoxically without much measure of the energy of cultural desire. Despite the popularity of the familiar, there is across the land a widespread impatience with the powers that be, an impatience with self-serving politicians of all stripes, with commercial feather-bedding and academic gobbledygook (which are simply other forms of me-first arrogance), and with the casual disregard by which institutions variously and repeatedly sacrifice individual human lives to the tyranny of system.

People run institutions, but you'd seldom know it: many such people live in order to serve the system, not the other way around, and they devise all kinds of justifications for keeping *other people* out, cutting *other people* off, refusing *other people* opportunities that they themselves have had. Always it's "other people's" problem, in their mindset — it's "good for 'them' to suffer," say the system-servers, or "if 'they' didn't make the *right* choice 'they' have to take the consequences," or "'they' should develop the skills of the 'self-made man'" (self-made, my foot: such individuals grew up somehow, with nurturers, teachers, opportunities). The system-servers say these things, moreover, only until their own power is threatened; *then* their vocabulary shifts, and they start claiming to be just system-folks, needing help from the government (you and me, remember), except more so, because they're already bigger and (maybe, just maybe) have a government ear.

But then some of the folks who want to turf out the system-servers don't stand up to much scrutiny either. They don't really want to turf out the *system*; they just want to insert themselves into the *power*. Many kinds of separatism are born of such ambitions: it's a familiar Canadian scenario.

These comments started off to reflect informally on some of the books published in 1991 that I enjoyed. A few plain statements, a few plainly subjective reactions.

Nothing more, nothing less. But in a year of political absurdity, economic disparity, competitive arrogance, and an insensitivity to sensitivity, everything connects. A society that does not produce its own food is, by definition, reliant on another's diet. (Metaphor, metaphor.) An industry that does its own workers out of a job does itself out of a market at the same time. A culture that thinks it's healthy just because it's devised a set of self-protective rules has understood neither the function of the rules nor the character of health. When an institution like the CRTC's Broadcasting Board can declare that a Bryan Adams song cannot be played often on Canadian radio because it's *not Canadian enough*, then authority has got in the way of common sense. When the Parti Québécois can claim that Quebec can secede from Canada but that "the rules" do not allow any smaller unit to secede from Quebec, then a malicious arrogance is at loose in the land. And when the Canadian book industry wants help in securing itself against unfair competition, that may be laudable; but if it devises authoritarian barricades that would in practice establish distribution *monopolies*, and consequently prevent bookstores from obtaining books from outside the country even when they are not available within, then — *in practice* — the legislation that would ostensibly facilitate publishing would in fact ghettoize Canada, cut Canadian readers off from the rest of the world, confirm provinciality in the name of independence and leave power once again in the hands of a few.

But it seems to me that the desire for safety in publishing in 1991 led to banality rather than security, which is apparent in the quality of so many publications. Honest aspiration needs to be encouraged; but tedium does not. And aiming for the "safe" market — the market that does not wish to be intellectually disturbed by the unfamiliar, the unconventional, or the innovative — seems to encourage tedium more than honesty. While "style" is sometimes the criterion that one brings to literary evaluation, this time it's not the only one. I'm as impatient with a stylish story like Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape" in *Wilderness Tips* (which seems to be a pale reflection of the Australian story called *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) as with the effortful progress of, say, Katherine Govier's *Heart of Flame*, or Davies' recent tales, or a score of lesser works. The literary challenge for 1991 seemed less a desire to educate, inform, entertain, or amuse than a failure *to engage*. I do not think that this year's readers are any more bored or blasé than other years' readers (except perhaps with the so-called Constitutional Debates), but stale plots, stale styles, easy politics, and fashionable attitudes are no invitation to enthuse.

Fortunately there were some exceptions to this general dismissal of a year's publications. Like many another reader, I'm enthusiastic about Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, with its analytic exactness about cultural priorities, human relationships, and the parallel between the two. George McWhirter's *The Listeners* bristles with political contrarieties, and along with the anecdotes and tales in his

story collection *A Bad Day to be Winning* testifies to a creative talent that is still too little recognized. Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* stylishly probes the personal dimensions of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Veronica Ross's *Hannah B.* examines the resentments that surround a German Jewish identity. In a welcome return to short fiction, Matt Cohen (with *Freud: the Paris Notebooks*) again shows his talent for combining wit with passion and historical insight. Norman Ravvin's *Café des Westerns* and Michael Kenyon's *Rack of Lamb* both reveal the promise of a constructively skewed comic vision; and in Mark Frutkin's *Invading Tibet*, Don Dickinson's *Blue Husbands*, and Ekbert Faas's *Woyzeck's Head* are to be found serious preoccupations with popular culture and language. But of other books of fiction, the most interesting are collections — editions and re-evaluations — including the standard anthologies from Oxford (Robert Weaver's 5th series of short fiction) and from Oberon (*91* and *Coming Attractions 91*, both solid), Susan Gingell's *Bridge City* (Saskatoon stories), Ven Begamudré and Judith Krause's *Out of Place* (proving the multicultural character of the Prairies), the third volume in Hugh Hood's collected works (*The Isolation Booth*: many of the stories not collected before), John Thurston's *Voyages* (the short narratives of Susanna Moodie, as interesting for the editing as for the fiction), Sandra Campbell and Lorraine McMullen's *New Women* (a welcome re-examination of women's contributions to the literary history of the first two decades of the 20th century, including stories by Alice Jones and Georgina Sime), and Gwen Davies' fine edition of Thomas McCulloch's *The Mephibosheth Stepsure Letters.*

I'm generally enthusiastic, too, about the editorial and bibliographic enterprises, both because they demand a meticulous scholarship and because they serve subsequent readers, making information available that was difficult to locate or assemble before. Hence the new volume in the CWTW fiction series — on realists from Grove to Ross — merits attention, as do the articles assembled on 22 writers in volumes 7 and 8 of Jeffrey Heath's *Profiles in Canadian Literature* series (designed for a more general audience than are the ECW books). Also welcome is the *Canadian Feminist Periodical Index 1972-1985* from OISE; the 20th anniversary issue of *Event*; the 40th anniversary issue of *Quarry*; and such critical editions as Doug Barbour's collection of essays and interviews called *Beyond "Tish."*

Editorial consolidation as much as innovation also marked the year in poetry. Kathleen Scherf's excellent edition of *The Collected Poetry of Malcolm Lowry* brings a large body of (admittedly uneven) material together in one place, enabling future readers to draw on reliable texts. Betsy Warland's *InVersions* is an anthology of gay writings, political in intent, its contents ranging from testament to manifesto. Fred Cogswell and Jo-Anne Elder edited *Unfinished Dreams*, translations from the contemporary poetry of Acadia, which has been largely unknown outside its region and undeservedly consigned to cultural margins. Al Purdy in-

troduced *Last Makings*, a collection of late works by Earle Birney, which records how constant Birney's talent has been; Louis Dudek revised *Europe*, a poem that should renew interest in his fascination with modernism and cultural tradition; and among important volumes of "new and selected works" are Florence McNeil's *Swimming Out of History*, Dorothy Livesay's *The Woman I Am*, Margaret Avison's *Selected Poems*, and to my mind the most fascinating (for its verbal textures, its imaginative field) — *because perhaps it's the least familiar*: such are the barricades of literary canonicity — Colleen Thibaudeau's *The Artemesia Book*. I hurry to declare that not all books of poetry or fiction came my way in 1991, and to reaffirm that my comments are not a selection of THE "best," whatever that might mean in these circumstances, but a free-ranging meditation on some of the books I enjoyed reading. To which I would add another dozen titles: Roy Miki's *Saving Face*, William Robertson's *Adult Language Warning* (his "A Father Who Has Lost a Young Son" is a devastating poem), Rhea Tregebov's *The Proving Grounds*, John Barton's *Great Men*, April Bulmer's *A Salve for Every Sore*, David Manicom's *Theology of Swallows*, Sandra Nicholls' *The Untidy Bride*, Richard Harrison's *Recovering the Naked Man*, Heather Spears' *Human Acts*, Daphne Marlatt's *Salvage*, and Fred Wah's *So Far*. What is it that appeals? A cadence, a voice, a lyric intensity, a single image, a narrative impulse sometimes. There is no one reason for poetry, no rule for security of line.

This reflection leads to another. Among non-fiction works, a number of politically correct works probed racism, margins, gender, class — most of them worthwhile enterprises, valuable correctives to the conventions of history. Why is it then that one encounters such a covert (and not always covert) resistance these days to the aims of "political correctness" — the aims, that is, of re-evaluating the assumptions of historical generalization, questioning the priorities of a privileged ruling class? Perhaps in fact it's not the aims that are most being challenged, though inevitably some people exist who have so invested their self-image in aspiring to class power that they cannot brook any questioning of the status quo, cannot imagine themselves outside the safety of Received Opinion. Perhaps, that is, it is the *rigidity of political correctness in operation* that offends those who resist it. No-one with a shred of decency would champion racism, sexism, or other forms of cruelty. But no-one with a shred of common sense expects the world to be entirely free of bias either, even among those who champion political "correctness." In practice there is little difference between the rule that finds a song "not Canadian enough" and the rule that says only one political perspective is permissible.

Though Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, one might have thought, would have sufficiently exposed the political implications of "victim positions" to have made them psychologically unappealing, victimage (if one believes the newspapers and trusts the trends of academic magazines) has come close to being the *de rigueur* experience that permits a contemporary Canadian to speak at all. If so — if the

nation's multiple culture is thus reduced to a set of competitive disadvantages — then political re-evaluation has not served Canada well, or history; for there is much to admire in Canadian society, and if "political correctness" serves only to attack history and not at the same time also to praise *whatever each generation finds praiseworthy* in the present and past, then those who already scrabble to place themselves as the arbitrary designers of possibility will have taken over. Rather than being freed into generous alternatives, the future will be constrained. Power will not have been dislodged; it will simply have been renamed.

Consider this list of 1991 publications, all of them of some interest, some of them of great interest indeed: Robert McGehee's *Canada Rediscovered*; the reprint of Marius Barbeau's 2-volume work classifying *Totem Poles*; Orest Subtelny's *Ukrainians in North America*; Dionne Brand's *No Burden to Carry* (narratives of Black working women in Ontario between the 1920s and the 1950s); Denis Johnston's *Up the Mainstream: The Rise of Toronto's Alternative Theatres*; Joseph Pivato's *Literatures of Lesser Diffusion*; Ormand McKague's *Racism in Canada*; the special Ethnicity/Multiculturalism issue of *IJCS*; Gwendolyn Davies' *Studies in Maritime Literary History 1760-1930*; Patricia Smart's *Writing in the Father's House* (in English translation, on the emergence of a feminine voice in Quebec writing); Robert Lecker's *Canadian Canons* (attacking them); Brian Fawcett's *Unusual Circumstances* (attacking a lot of things); Smaro Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre*; Sylvia Söderlind's *Margin/Alias* (on "Canadian" and "Québécois" fiction); C. H. Wyke's *Sam Selvon's Dialectical Style and Fictional Strategy*; Ben-Zion Shek's *French-Canadian and Québécois Novels*; and Volume II of *Gatherings*, the *En'owkin Journal*. All declare an angle of discord; all use that angle to fish for converts in troubled waters. Yet when, one might ask, does the "politically correct" turn as restrictive as the attitudes it seeks to replace or at least subvert? When does political correctness merely mask personal diatribe? Why is it that Brian Fawcett's essays — so willingly and openly curmudgeonly — are so refreshing in a context of safe class, safe gender, safe edge, and safe razor?

Of the books in this list, some that on the surface seem most neutral turn out to be very political indeed — McGehee's attractively illustrated book about explorers' "discoveries" of Canada, for example, which remains bound by an Atlantic focus: "discovery," apparently, comes from the East. Other writers, by contrast, make their geographic bounds a term of analysis, as do Davies and Johnston, in extremely cogent literary enquiries, or make them function as metaphor, as does Kamboureli, writing provocatively and effectively about the status of the contemporary long poem. Several critics run aground on political binaries: is *Canadian/Québécois* "correct"? (It's politically charged, though neither as valid nor as absolute a division as many of those who use the terms as an exclusive binary pair would like us to believe.) Is *French-Canadian/Québécois* ALSO CORRECT,

and if so, what does this mean — that many correctnesses are possible but only some are acceptable? To whom? Who is the arbiter of acceptability, the officer who polices critical speech? Who can suppress language, and why can language be "acceptably" suppressed in the name of cultural security?

Given these tensions, two biographies published during 1991 — Rosemary Sullivan's *By Heart*, about Elizabeth Smart, and John Oliphant's *Brother Twelve* — almost epitomize the year's preoccupations. The two subjects interestingly relate: a not-very-interesting man, it transpires, who nevertheless ran a cult and (until it dissipated on him) exercised power; and a woman who turned up her nose at social convention but who never quite gave up the power that her family and class accorded her, thus leading the onlooker to deduce that it was primarily the security of social position that permitted a secure rebellion. Such a conclusion suggests that fashion rules all, or at least governs what constitutes an "acceptable" behaviour, for rebel and ruler alike. The subjects' inner lives, of course, like the ordinary daily lives of a good many other people, might tell a different story. In another book, Mary Meigs comes closer to revealing this inner life, talking about being lesbian, being old, and being in a sensitive documentary film: *In the Company of Strangers.*

The film's title metaphor — Company of Strangers — is not irrelevant to these reflections; nor its subject: the sometimes deliberate, sometimes accidental isolations that desolate old age, and the companionship among strangers that *can* compensate for different kinds of loss. That companionships can develop among strangers is a testament of sorts, both a gift and a promise to the next generation and the next. The gaps that separate generations, however, and the gaps that people (even literary critics) construct to separate themselves from others in their own generation threaten not only the promise of companionship but also the working ties of community. In many ways, the political correctness "movement," if that is what it is, simply declares some legitimate objections to being made to feel irrelevant in a given society, at a given time; a *restrictive enactment* of "correctness," however, does not resolve social disparities, and a simple reversal of power and marginalization would just be conventionally spiteful. But like self-indulgence and ambitious rebellion, impulsive acts of spite are signs more of insecurity than intentional cruelty. At once claiming authority and disparaging others' authority, they suggest both an extraordinary presumptuousness and an extraordinary uncertainty. The desire to *be correct*, in parallel fashion, simultaneously designs a version of perfection and barricades it, in case to others it might already be obviously inexact. The insidious and potentially violent implications of this pattern should be obvious. Those who design the perfectly correct are always at the same time designing those who do not do as they do, think as they think, say as they say, *as the "imperfect" as well as the ostensibly "incorrect."* From there to scapegoating is a very short step. Paradoxically, this is a conventional, not a radical

position, the kind of position that only the personally insecure ever find persistently, emotionally necessary. Seeking safety, of course, may well be common sense. Seeking safety at the expense of others, however — championing the uniform of self as the only arbiter of possibility — guarantees neither security nor productive change. New "correctnesses," like old "binaries," have at some point to be read as "systems." And do systems have a way of perpetuating power? Oh yes. Their own, especially. Sure thing.

W.N.

TAKING LEAVE

Matthew Manera

from opposite sides
of the train window we are
balanced on the edge
of separation the glass

uncouples voice
from gesture we are
disarticulated you

are frozen on the receding
platform guarding the negative
inside the camera in which

i have never been allowed
to leave the station

in which i have forever
surrendered impetus
to implication