

BALANCING THE YIN AND THE YANG

THE TURN OF THE DECADE between the 1950s and the 1960s was a time node of peculiar significance in the development of the literary world that Canadian writers and readers now inhabit. The Canada Council had been founded in 1957, marking an official recognition of the previously half-organized public support for the arts whose extent Maria Tippett has recently and surprisingly documented in *Making Culture* (1990). The first durable national literary magazine for many years had appeared in the *Tamarack Review* in 1956. It would be followed by *Prism* in 1959 and the internationally oriented *Malahat Review* in 1965, pioneers in a broad flow of literary journals operated largely by writers.

In 1959 *Canadian Literature* made its appearance, the first and for some years the sole journal devoted to considering only writers and writing in Canada. It stepped out, as I remember well, into a bleak morning, derided by old-fashioned academics who still doubted if there were really an identifiable American, let alone a Canadian or an Australian, literature within the grand old English-speaking tradition. But it came at a crucial turning point. Its deriders said that it would find neither enough books to review, nor, if it did, any critics to review them. But with what Northrop Frye called the “verbal explosion” of the 1960s, the books came, and abundantly in every genre, and the critics emerged to discuss them, sometimes poets turning to another precise art, sometimes young academics fighting free of the New Criticism’s pedantry and of thematic didacticism. Over a few years, as writers and their friends founded small and medium-sized Canadian-owned publishing houses, and new magazines appeared in places as far apart as Queen Charlotte City and Seven Persons in Alberta, a literary world was created into which magazines like *Canadian Literature* settled for a long life.

Hardly less impressive than this infrastructure’s appearing as unexpectedly as the ice palace in *Self Condemned* was the emergence of a new fauna to inhabit it. 1959 was the year when Hugh MacLennan, dean of Canadian novelists in the mid-century, published his masterpiece, *The Watch that Ends the Night*, the last of the novels with which he had for a least a decade dominated the field of fiction.

Shortly afterwards, with *Mrs Golightly and Other Stories* (1961), Ethel Wilson signalled the end of a brief but brilliant late-life career in which, with a greatly different sensibility from MacLennan's, she had complemented his work with a series of novels acutely conscious of traditional mores but also of contemporary manners.

The same years saw the appearance of books by authors who would tend to dominate the next and even succeeding decade; a surprising number were by women. One of them, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, stood in pharos-like isolation, since it was the writer's only novel; producing in addition only a few short stories and essays, she was in this respect an editor's despair, with many promises and no delivery. But though it was either condemned or ignored by most critics when it appeared, and has had no direct successors, *The Double Hook* wielded an immense influence on later Canadian fiction. Frank Davey described it justly as a "highly poetic and elliptical work" whose "discontinuous and highly imaginative style . . . reiterates the distrust of discursive language that it embodies." It showed younger Canadian writers that they could go safely beyond the romantic realism that had earlier characterized most Canadian fiction and could shed their themes for fantasies. It was a potent influence in persuading such writers to follow whims and intuitions and to variegate their work. And variegation away from a presumed norm, with each writer finding and following his own muse, is the main characteristic of a young literature moving into maturity and shedding dominating influences.

At the same time the first works of two writers who would be among the most important in the following decade, both of them women, were issued. In 1960 appeared Margaret Laurence's novel of the Africa that was lurching into independence, *This Side Jordan*, in which few readers saw the promise of the great realist novels with which she would create her own parahistorical prairie world. From *The Stone Angel* to *The Diviners*, appearing in 1974, Manawaka would give a local habitation to the Canadian imagination. And in 1961 (year of *The Stone Angel*) Margaret Atwood made her appearance with a modest and hardly noticed broadsheet of poems, *Double Persephone*.

I find much that happened at that time, and a great deal that led us to it reflected at least obliquely in the essays that make up this 133rd (who would have believed it possible in 1959?) issue of *Canadian Literature*. For apart from the poems, it is virtually all about and mostly by women writers, starting with the lively early transient — so annoying to Samuel Johnson — Frances Brooke, and including neglected figures from the generations in between, like Jessie Sime (whom the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* ignored) and Laura Goodman Salverson, who has too often been treated as merely another immigrant novelist and thrown into the outer multicultural darkness.

Not long ago, pursuing my studies of the zoophyte we call Canadian Literature,

I read a fascinating, somewhat eccentric piece of cultural history by Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome*. It was not entirely about women's writing; in fact, as its title suggests, the showpiece on which the book's thesis had been built up was Major John Richardson's melodramatic novel, *Wacousta*, at first glance a tale of masculine conflict in the wilderness of early post-conquest Canada.

McGregor develops what Dennis Duffy has called elsewhere "the novel's strange, perhaps unintended, sexual undertones." She shows *Wacousta* as a novel dominated by androgynous inclination in which the heroic as well as the cowardly British officers alike feel and speak and act in feminine ways and form ambivalent relationships; in this sense they are opposed to *Wacousta's* "exaggerated masculinity." McGregor remarks: "Instead of Mother Nature versus a paternalistic establishment, therefore, *Wacousta* seems to pit a feminine garrison against a masculine gothic landscape." From this and other literary evidence, McGregor draws the conclusion that the "Canadian symbolic ego . . . whatever the sex of its various literary personae," becomes

feminine in temperament and functions: emotional, passive and vulnerable. As Otto Rank points out, women's psychology — like, it would appear, the representative Canadian's — 'can be designated as insideness, in contradiction to man's centrifugal outsideness.'

Such conclusions may seem to contradict much in early Canadian history that suggests a paternalistic society with macho values. Yet, as I pointed out while citing McGregor in *The Century That Made Us*, Canada as a collectivity has always been vulnerable and hesitant in its relations with imperial powers, and has been forced often into the subordination which characterizes the feminine role in a paternalistic order. Hence it has developed its passivity and inwardness in its relations with the outside world, and also that obsession with national unity which to other peoples, and notably to the healthily disunited Swiss, seems like a hysteria if not a symptom of collective dementia. Of course, Canada has not been lacking in great achievements in which the "masculine" virtues of daring and endurance shine forth. But these achievements have always been consummated within our own territory; we built our great railways ourselves, but we fought our great wars as the willing servants of others, whose interest we promoted and whose orders we obeyed.

Thus McGregor's argument has its quotient of truth, for the patterns of domination within Canada have a distinctly matriarchal quality, whether it is a matter of the Widow of Windsor or the Old Women of politics, the Widow Twankeyish figures like Mackenzie King and John Diefenbaker and Joe Clark who so often end up as prime ministers of Canada. The historical reasons for this are obvious, since Queen Victoria was Canada's longest-living and most loved monarch. Even today, unlike the fickle British, we still take a public holiday on her birthday, and

all over the land, outside parliament buildings and city halls, as young slim queen and buxom matron, her statues stand, green with the verdigris of generations. Such enduring reverence for the great old Queen, mother of her peoples, suggests a matriarchal frame of mind. And such, in feeling, that of Canada has been, though in fact men ruled in the Queen's name, and the women had to struggle for their rights as they have done under all the notable female rulers from Cleopatra to Indira Gandhi.

One can draw interesting parallels here, which perhaps neither side could happily accept, between the more sophisticated native societies and the social structure developing among the dominant white groups in 19th century Canada, particularly those that link with the emergence of Canadian literature as we know it.

It was the mother of mothers in the Iroquois longhouse, just as it was the mother of mothers in Windsor Castle, who chose men for politically responsible roles and even dismissed them when they failed. Just as the women of the Five Nations provided by farming, the means of subsistence for the tribe while the men campaigned or hunted, so among the pioneers in both Upper Canada and the Prairies the women looked after subsistence — garden, chickens, rearing pigs, preserving and cooking food, making cloth and clothes, candles and soap — while the men were clearing and planting the land (and so they acquired a transformative and radicalising role in rural Canadian society long before they won the vote). And just as the Iroquois mothers were guardians of a moiety of tribal traditions and culture (and have continued their role down to the 1990 Oka crisis), so from the Strickland sisters of the 1830s onwards there were always women writers who took it as their task to maintain the literary standards as well as the morals of their community.

In each generation since the Stricklands, women like Isabella Valancy Crawford and Sara Jeannette Duncan created key and almost symbolic roles for women in Canadian writing, as, in different and special ways, have other women — with causes — such as Nellie McClung and Agnes Maule Machar. Later in the 1930s and 1940s, such women as Dorothy Livesay, Anne Wilkinson and P. K. Page, figured among the pioneers of Canadian modernism. But the importance that women have more recently assumed is really a cumulative outcome of Frye's "verbal explosion" of the 1960s and 1970s, which tended to operate qualitatively as much as quantitatively, bringing women in absolutely growing numbers into the literary world more rapidly than ever before, and bringing them into comparison and complementarity with their male companions as never before.

I deliberately reject the word competition at this point, since I do not believe that among writers it exists between the genders. I may have been fortunate, but I have yet to encounter a male writer I respect who has not welcomed the great accesses of vitality and variety that have entered Canadian writing with the

appearance of so many women novelists and poets and *femmes-de-lettres*. The arguments of gender politics—prejudice and lack of opportunity—hardly seem to apply any more in this field. Yesterday I looked through publishers' catalogues, seeking books to discuss in a literary column I am about to begin, and found that four out of the five books I had chosen were by women. Women not only publish nowadays with no more difficulty than men; any writer is likely to find far more often than in the past that the editor he/she deals with at a publishing house or a magazine will be a woman. The Canadian literary world, structure and infrastructure alike, is vastly different from the cautious corporal's guard of men only I encountered on returning to Canada in 1949.

It seems to me that what is happening in the world of Canadian writing leads us forward, as a society's cultural manifestations always should. On all planes, after all, the wonder and satisfaction of existence depend on the true balancing of the yin and the yang, the feminine and masculine principles: not the androgynous unity of the Angels, those impossible beings, or of Tiresias, the perfect wise man, but the everlasting interplay of the forces of life we all carry with us. Anything tending to assure that balance, to continue that interplay, like the growing importance of women in literature, must be welcome and fostered. That is why I value the insights contained in the 133rd issue of *Canadian Literature* and am happy to have been invited to write the editorial.

Having written it, I remember a curious poem by Robert Graves, in which he muses on the problem:

Why have such scores of lovely, gifted girls
Married impossible men . . .

and then asks himself:

Or do I always over-value women
At the expense of men?
Do I?
It might be so.

Like Graves, I find it prudent and pleasant and in some lyrical way just to over-value women at the expense of men, if that is what I do. Wise women, perhaps, reciprocate.

G.W.