YUPPIE TIME

THEY SAY THE YUPPIES are dying; some say dead. Dead without issue is what one message said. The messenger, of course, was said to lie. Myself I think . . . — well, what would Smith have thought, devoted as he was to eclectic detachment? Could he stand back, in the name of objectivity, let others see and say? or would he have combatted creeping rigidity, exposed the threat in a world where choice is anathema, profit the arbiter of moral decision, and fad the designer of judgment?

Politics, criticism, writing: all are involved. Politically, it seems, we live in a system increasingly unfamiliar with the principles that underpin it. We know the phrases — "representative government," "the will of the people," and all the rest — but more and more these translate in practice into government by pressure group and poll, where the organized and the uninformed insist they are the "representative" will. All other points of view, and openness to other points of view, are disallowed — dismissed, interestingly, as "special pleading." It's like living with Louky Bersianik's Euguelionne, in a photographic negative; all the words have taken on opposite meanings. Pollsters use them; poll-readers believe them. But they mean only their instant meanings, digital phrases for "this point in time."

The familiar words are those that make people cynical about politics and advertising together, as though they were enterprises of the same order: "progress," "tough," "reality" — they're bandied about with the same inconsequentiality as the sales-manager's "easy," "new," and "free." But what do they *mean*? Often not what they seem to say, leaving open the doors of suspicion. When "tough" decisions are recurrently those that hurt the old, the poor, the female, and the young, doesn't it really mean "easy"? When manufacturers reissue war toys under Old Testament and Fantasy names, have they stopped being war toys? In their new form are they giving credence to violence in our society? Do we accept unthinkingly whatever is implied by the phrase "safe weapons"? One of the effective strategies in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is to present this process of denaturing words as one of the techniques of desensitizing people to the threat of autocracy. "Aunts," "Angels," "Guardians," "Eyes" — in the controlled world Atwood writes about, these terms have lost in practice whatever nurturing connotations they once had, except that they're used by the agents in power to create the illusion that restrictive violence is the same as nurturing, and that one form of authority alone is worthy of support.

What does this have to do with "representatives"? It has to do with how we understand the principles that shape the systems we live by. Traditionally, "Representative" members in a parliamentary system were not in principle sent off just to tabulate the current prejudices back home and vote mechanically. Rather, they were to take on the "representative" responsibility of finding out what the people at home did not have the time to find out, to enquire into what is involved in any given issue, to vote intelligently, far-sightedly, therefore sometimes unpopularly, in the light of information. Wishful thinking? Maybe. (Or maybe cynicism is just idealism-with-walls.) At any time, the representative system is one open to abuse, both from within and from without. Legislatures sometimes become arenas for name-calling more than centres for thoughtful individual debate. But there is also a tyranny in poll-taking — in *identifying* a momentary wave of opinion with "the will of the people" or with public policy — that is as dangerous as any tyranny of one.

Parliamentary rule does not mean that people shouldn't be watchful, involved in political judgment and able to tell their representatives what they think. Nor does debate guarantee accuracy. But government-by-poll-and-publicity-agent is not preferable to government-by-anonymity; it's just a different version of authority. It is government by fad and fear, one playing in a closed system, for the appearance of safety, running to keep up with this instant "now" (whatever impulse may momentarily govern it) and therefore unable to rise above the "me"-generation's "mine"-field. As Travis Lane writes,

> In quarantine in castle rooms the poets
> sit crosslegged and chat. . . .
> > the castle poets comb
> the skies for lust and trickery. Who is
> the latest star in the polls? 'Fly, fly
> the plague.'

("The Past is Never Irrelevant")

To put this point in a way that reflects more directly on critical method, it's an issue that discriminates between thoughtful argument and easy system, between discursive enquiry and presumptive closure. Like the legislature afraid of thinking for itself, the critic who is more intent on dismissing someone else than suggesting an alternative constructive way to read is acting insecurely. Plainly, alternatives are problematic. The "me"-critic dislikes them: wants to be seen to be clever, but is afraid of being wrong — therefore finds others "wrong" first. "Right," "wrong": guiding the "me"-critic's fear is this curious belief in absolutes of interpretation — absolutes that are somehow intrinsically moral. Such absolutes confirm the ego, because (allowing only two options) they separate the one set of judgments (neatly enclosed, pronounced "right") from all others. The

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plurality of the others does not enter the argument: "others" (all being "not the one") are uniformly declared to belong to the simple category "wrong." Wickedness is thus made to live in critical procedure, and equated with those "special interest" groups called "not us." "Us," meanwhile, virtuously enclosed by system, is called "representative," confirmed by numbers (the result seen to be fixed, not susceptible to change), and pronounced "truth." Oddly, it seems to need the ratification of others to *be* "true" in these terms. It's not an alternative position; it's a group frame of mind, one that reads the world by yuppie time.

It's unfair, of course, to blame one generation for faddish absolutism; that's not the point here. "To be concerned with moral predicaments at all," writes David Malouf in *12 Edmonstone Street*, "is an indulgence, if all it involves is the desire to be in the right." The point is that no lock-step system of interpretation has yet proved an adequate measure of human behaviour and aspiration. The Yuppie clockface with digital exactitude does not tell time "righter" than the approximate durations other people live with ("going on noon," "just past three," "in a while," "later"); if anything it simply codifies a moment's history already finished, defines an illusion of accuracy ("truth") in a (still continuing) age of pulse and motion. Security is confirmed by "everybody doing it." Except the others — who don't, of course, count.

I was reading, some months ago, Michael Wilding's 1974 novel *Living Together*, which is a tidy, caustic vignette of the limits of living by fads. Joyously delivering its double-entendres as though they were revolutionary salvos, the novel ends up neatly espousing a set of such ordinary, traditional social values that it's ultimately hard to decide whether one ox is being gored, or two. Probably it's two, but for the moment that's a side issue. The delight of the novel lies in its asides:

> He feared isolation now, feared especially being left behind. He waited carefully to find the new idioms before trusting himself to these new experiences.

Inside the system, it's the code that matters: not what one means, but how one says.

There's a widespread assumption in literary criticism that there exists a connection between meaning and saying, though it doesn't always prove a workable premise. Some writers write in order deliberately to refuse or subvert "meaning," and there are also those for whom meaning is an accident of speech more than an act of mind. Sometimes, given the way our training shapes our expectations, it's not always easy to tell the difference. People do speak and write in codes, not always aware of their ramifications. When the code becomes a substitute for thought, however, then it also turns into a revelation of the fear of being seen not to be doing and saying whatever is in fashion. If that happens to literature and criticism, everyone's in trouble.

In Wilding, such an attitude has unwitting political and cultural overtones:

> "You've got an extraordinary collection of records," she said; not excitedly.
> "Probably," Paul said. Like a nation that has suffered sudden bouts of westernization and been forgotten in between, there was no continuity between the separate positions. "It's a sort of colonial culture," he said.

But Paul's apology is all cultural cringe: a defensive tic before an expected putdown. The fad espouses "system" after all, eschews plurality. For plurality (verbally derided here as "colonial") implicitly denies the exclusive validity of single systems. Hence while the apology presumes to identify system and nationhood with sophistication, the only kind of nationhood a "single system" can equate with is the authoritarian variety, one buttressed by an arrogation of "truth" and at the same time burdened by its blind, passive faith in a society "purified" of those elements that differ from a single defined norm. Some purity; some sophistication.

Where, in such a system, is there room for thought, or thoughtfulness? Back to Wilding once more:

> Within the cubbyhole he had arranged for himself he could place his box of filing cards. . . . He dreamed of his ideal information storage system, the key to all mythology on data cards. Wand-like he would stick in the slender rod and all the items on a chosen topic would come out with it. The automation of the punched card.

The passage is already out-of-date, 1974 being so long ago in computer time. The cabined, cubbyhole dream that Wilding describes is not of information but of exactness, the desperate need to fix by number, to find security in data, which can supplant the ability to deal thoughtfully and creatively with the inevitable inexactnesses of choice.

Yet data, of all things, is perhaps most insecure, a sign of likelihood at best, more often a code fixed by the expectations of the data-gatherer. ("Representative" and "mean" do not equate.) The "uncertainty principle" beloved of physicists is not, moreover, as it is often taken to be, an excuse for not knowing; it's a way of recognizing that light can function both as wave (motion) and particle (in a fixed moment), but that we cannot measure *at once* both the exactness of position and the speed of movement. We can measure only what we look for. But looking for one does not invalidate the other; it is a way of increasing options rather than digitally fixing them. Security doesn't rest, therefore, in polls; it lies in the knowledge that the language people bring to measurement or representation resists enclosure. And dismissal. Reading the workings of word and world is an informed gesture of creative interpretation, a thoughtful impulse, an exchange of ideas. It's a question of talking, in different ways, to tell the times.

W.N.