

## REAR VIEW

I WAS SURPRISED TO HEAR George Plimpton commenting recently on the lack of response which is an inevitable condition of the writer's existence. Surely not George Plimpton, with his many masks, his enormous sales, his superbowl subject matter? But there he was, on CBC Radio, reflecting ruefully that authors almost never *see* people reading their books, and seldom *hear* from readers. I turned back with new energy to the forty or fifty titles which seem permanently mounded on *Canadian Literature's* review desk. If Plimpton feels lonely, what then of the Canadian poet whose second book might sell 500 copies over three years? Somebody should be seen reading that book. Somebody should be heard talking back.

When Bill New invited me to join *Canadian Literature* he asked me to take principal responsibility for reviews, and to think about solutions for the problem of too many books and too little space. I began to flirt with the idea of radically cutting back our reviewing — to feature five or six major reviews in each issue. But within a few months two comments changed my mind. One reader wrote that he always began reading *Canadian Literature* at the back and worked forward (which doesn't say much for the number of readers who might get to the Editorial). Another reader told me she sensed the journal might become exclusively a review journal — a development she would have warmly approved (but one which we are not considering). And of course there was George Plimpton. And the need to talk back. There is a definite place, I thought, for a journal that still *tries* to cover the field, to review every significant work which appears. And for a journal which at the same time emphasizes the *re* in review, that encourages the contemplative review, a putting aside and picking up again, a reflection rather than a summary, a discovering of contexts rather than an instant impression. Reading backwards could be an imitation of the reviewer's turning around to look again. As in a Japanese garden, the perspective going back the way you have just come is entirely different.

But to define "the field" and to define "significant" is the trick, and the impossibility. The problems are familiar to those of us who are teachers as well as stu-

dents, editors as well as the edited, readers as well as writers. Often accidents decide what is reviewed: missed deadlines, unanswered mail, changed addresses, and more surprisingly, the fact that repeatedly requested review copies may never arrive. Such definition by accident has its appeal, but I still would like the authors to be able to hear the talkback.

But while learning to live with accidents, I have found some objectives, and, thus, some ways of defining, have become clearer. Paradoxically, we are trying to solve the problem of too many books in too little space by expanding rather than contracting. We are necessarily having to ask for more package reviews, for reviews which discuss more than one title. Often, particularly in the case of slim volumes of poetry, we send a half-dozen or more books together and ask the reviewer to pick three or four which most deserve attention. This strategy sacrifices comprehensiveness, but it does eliminate many notices that might be uniformly negative — discouraging to writers, and of little interest to readers. More important, we hope by this method to have the decision as to which books should be reviewed made after a careful and attentive reading, rather than after the hurried sampling to which an editor is often forced between a lecture on *Major Barbara* and the office wine and cheese party.

We have become more selective in the way we review, or notice, anthologies and reprinted material. But we have tried to keep pace with translations, from an increasing number of source languages. We are particularly interested in reviewing more titles where the expansion encourages a break with the predictable. We *did* send two books of Vancouver stories to the same reviewer. But we often resist the most obvious combinations — we would happily combine a book of stories about Vancouver with a book of poems about Cape Breton, or with a book on the theory of short fiction, or with a cultural history of changing social patterns in twentieth-century Canada. We are making an extra effort to link works of Canadian literature with studies of other literatures which have no overt connection with Canada. Our hope is to avoid *dirigisme* and still encourage reader and reviewer to discover and invent new contexts for the reading of Canadian literature.

Francess Halpenny's recent examination of Canadian publications in public libraries found that hardly any use university quarterlies such as this for selection. Their approach is, in part, understandable. The delays of quarterly publication, and the reviewing which we encourage, mean that *Canadian Literature* is not quite the place to find out what books have just appeared — or what book to buy Uncle Steve for his birthday. But this is a journal in which to speculate about a new surround for a Canadian book. And the Reviews section is also a place to relax intelligently, to risk a hypothesis without having to “on-the-other-hand” it out of existence. Authors often tell us we are the only, or one of the very few journals to review their titles. Our reviewers repeatedly show us the surprising rightness of putting together two books whose connection we could only remotely

intuit. Such discovery is the core of the craft of fine reviewing, and the pleasure of *Canadian Literature's* rear view, of walking and reading back the way we have just come.

L.R.

## THE WRONG QUESTION

*Anne Swannell*

On the telephone one Sunday,  
trying to re-establish contact  
after fifteen years, you said  
*So what have you been doing  
with your life?*

If you had asked  
what I did today  
I'd have said  
I walked on the beach at Ross Bay  
while girl's jeans size ten  
swung soapy circles  
round boy's jeans size twelve  
in the Fairfield Plaza laundromat.  
I'd have said the three of us  
had pancakes for lunch  
and then I took the kids  
to Esquimalt to skate  
while I went to hear P. K. Page  
read at Open Space.

But you did not ask that question  
and so I only said  
not much