

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS YOUNG PUP

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MONTREAL HAS A CERTAIN GENIUS for spawning poetic movements — from poets like A. J. M. Smith and Frank Scott in the twenties, down through Louis Dudek, Irving Layton and A. M. Klein a generation later. And while individual novelists had always existed in English-Montreal — Hugh MacLennan, John Glassco (and stretching a point) Brian Moore and Leonard Cohen — it was my privilege to be associated with the only conscious *gathering* of English language Montreal prose writers in this century.

Time and doctoral dissertations seem to bestow inevitability and distinctive colouration to such groups, as though internal affinity, not external need, account for literary alliance. We were five prose writers in the same city at the same time; we had similar critical standards and very different literary tastes. And in 1970, under the guidance of John Metcalf and Hugh Hood, we — Hood and Metcalf, Ray Fraser and Ray Smith and myself — became the Montreal Story Teller. We're now a footnote in the larger history of Canadian literature, but we rate a few paragraphs in the history of contemporary Canadian fiction. The Story Teller is yet another instance of synchronicity and serendipity at work: contemporary Canadian literature was just being born, and we were in a time and place, with the energy and vision to assist the delivery.

Montreal is a cultured city with many writers. The problem, in those first few years, was with me. The only young writer I knew in town was Jerry (C. J.) Newman. Hood was around, of course, but teaching in another world, l'Université de Montréal. I'd been writing in a vacuum, except for Jerry's critiques and nearly all the stories I was publishing, despite their Canadian setting, were still being placed in the United States. Nevertheless, I'd felt hurt and resentful when John Metcalf, another local novelist and story-writer I'd never met, published the first significant anthology of the new writing — *Sixteen by Twelve* — and had left me out.

(How a pompous young pup can howl!)

I was still discovering the city, or more precisely, discovering parts of myself opened up by the city. I was respectful if not worshipful of all its institutions. I defended its quirks and inconsistencies as though defending myself against abuse; I was even charmed by things I would have petitioned against in Milwaukee like

separate Catholic and Protestant schools, Sunday closings and male-only bars. "The Frencher the Better" was my motto to cover my encroachment on the aboriginal rights of the English.

I was writing very openly, in the late sixties, of Montreal. The city was drenched with significance for me — it was one of those perfect times when every block I walked yielded an image, when images clustered with their own internal logic into insistent stories. A new kind of unforced, virtually transcribed story (new for me, at least) was begging to be written — stories like "A Class of New Canadians," "Eyes," "Words for Winter," "Extractions and Contradictions," "Going to India," and "At the Lake" were all written in one sitting, practically without revision. I'd never been so open to story, so avid for context. I was reading all the Canadian literature I could get my hands on, reading Canadian exclusively; there was a continent out there to discover. My literary community was more on the page than in the flesh. I had only Jerry Newman, George Bowering for a few years, Margaret Atwood for one year, and I had the poetry-readings at Sir George and the parties after them — those were my only contacts with the raucous, boozey, quick-witted writing-life I'd known, and depended on, at Iowa.

THOSE, THEN, ARE THE pre-Story Teller facts. I knew of Metcalf from the Clarke-Irwin 1969 volume of *New Canadian Writing* (he'd appeared with Jerry Newman and Doug Spettigue; I'd appeared a year earlier in the same series with Dave Godfrey and David Lewis Stein). Of course I knew Hugh Hood's work — he went all the way back to my Iowa days when I'd read him in Dave Godfrey's hand-me-down review copies. Ray Smith I knew through his "Cape Breton Is the Thought-Control Centre of Canada" story in *Tamarack* — one of the breakthrough stories in our writing. I particularly remembered it because I'd thought my story, "The Mayor" (later retitled "The Fabulous Eddie Brewster") was a shoo-in for the President's Medal as best story of the year. That my story actually *did* win is a testimony to the innate conservatism of the judging process.

I've tried to be honest, even if I come off looking terrible. I know how this must read: I was a posturing little pup, a typical product of American alienation, mixed with Canadian sentimentality. (The portrait of "Norman Dyer" in "A Class of New Canadians" is my own ironic self-portrait.) I considered myself an heir to the Two Solitudes, the uncrowned princeling fated to write the books, discover the new talent, script the movies, teach the secrets, that would move Canadian literature to the cutting edge of the world's consciousness. Canada's duty was to exploit its twin heritage of English and French, its twin tensions of America and

Britain. I was ambitious, ruthless, selfish, vain, and arrogant. I was also hard-working, observant, anxious to learn, and even humble.

Then Metcalf called. How he got my name, I never asked. He mentioned the group: himself (whom I resented), Smith (whom I feared), Hood (whom I admired), and Ray Fraser, whom I didn't know. None of us, I suspect, knew that Literary History was knocking — that moment when one's lonely individual efforts have suddenly passed a critical mass and gained enough collective substance to set off other writers' alarms.

Our purpose was admirably eleemosynary. We would charge two hundred dollars a performance — forty dollars apiece. Twice the scale of *Fiddlehead*. The Protestants wouldn't have us (I had assumed, until reading the full story in Metcalf's *Kicking Against the Pricks* that the Protestants had rejected us because Hugh was so dreadfully Catholic), but the island was even richer in Catholic schools, and they were agreeable to trying us out.

Money, then, was the first goal. John and the two Rays were living hand-to-mouth as free-lancers. Hugh, as a matter of principle (everything with Hugh is a matter of principle) insists on top dollar for any creative work. Ray Fraser epitomized the word, and the consequences, of "free-lancing"; he raised it to an art while writing characteristically Frasersque stories for the local tabloid, *Midnight*, in the Maritime tall-tale genre touched with a bit of the Montreal macabre: **DAD RAPES INFANT SON; SERVES HIM FOR DINNER.**

Our second goal was a bit more combative. John was tired of the bloody poets getting all the readings and recognition. It seemed to us that the league of warblers had enjoyed their monopoly on the stages of the country quite long enough. Prose was intrinsically more interesting and easy to follow than poetry. There's no reason why stories, if limited to fifteen minutes, should not move, delight and instruct any audience — and still not betray our own high standards. This, it seemed to me, was a battle worth joining.

The third, and most altruistic goal, was to prove something to, and for, Canada. John had taught in the high schools and knew the attitudes of the boards and most of the teachers. Chesterton and Kipling as moderns. Morley Callaghan or Hugh Garner thrown in just so the students could thrill to seeing the word "Toronto" in print. Just think what *we* could do: living, young, Montreal, funny, sexy, bold, dirty writers. We'd begin that great reaming out, the great scouring of all those corroded pipes. We'd have the rarest of all literary privileges — that of creating our own audience.

I REMEMBER THOSE DRIVES through unfamiliar but very Catholic parts of the island; a jolly band of prose-troubadors in my car, or Hugh's. We

were a hit from the beginning; I couldn't understand it. The bookings were coming three and sometimes four times a week. Every now and then I'd wince at our collective arrogance, inflicting all this shameless puffery, this elevating slobber on immigrant youngsters whose English needs were for something more rudimentary and whose experience of literature was utterly virginal. And a second later I'd think what a splendid, noble thing we were doing. Those kids were our perfect audience, uncorrupted by ghastly good taste, analogues to our purest intentions. Didn't we want to communicate the real, the actual, the tangible *montréalitude*? Didn't we want to present ourselves as serious writers who were also living, imperfect Montreal presences? Didn't we pride ourselves on the accessibility of our stories, that anyone could appreciate them? Our proudest boast in fact was that unlike Chesterton and Conrad, *we were in the phone book*! Look us up, call us, talk to us. We drink, we fart, we get horny, we make fools of ourselves, we lust, our lives are usually in a mess, we're afraid of cops and taxes, we screw around, and we're not ashamed to show it. Like kindergarten kids with finger paints, we wallow in it! We make art of it!

In a typical reading, I'd do one voice from a segment of John's novel, *Going Down Slow*, where a high school teacher is so drunk he gets thrown out of a bar. I read about a man who watches Greek butchers popping calf testicles in their mouths and sucking; Big Ray Smith did a monologue on tall girls' fashions with such intensity that he would be crying while the audience laughed. Hugh's "Socks" was about an immigrant from southern Italy who ends up working on snow removal in wet socks. And there was Ray Fraser's unpredictable and never-repeated routine, tall tales of mounting disgust, teetering over a pit (one suspected) of imminent intervention from a barely-amused administration.

Despite all that (and of course because if it) we became legitimate. We grew out of the ghetto of Catholic schools to the junior colleges and university classrooms. We filled the second issue of the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* (my two tales in that issue, "Is Oakland Drowning?" and "The Voice of the Elephant" were inspired purely by our ensemble readings, the need for levity, brevity, and surreality. I wanted to be as precise as Metcalf, as witty as Smith, as various as Hood, as irreverent as Fraser). We read at the conventions of the Protestant teachers. We popped up in Fredericton, Saint John, and Ottawa. We got to be polished, convincing, and even successful in all three of our initial goals.

We were clearly an idea whose time had come. We were a new generation of Canadian writing, arriving all at once, in all parts of the country. The first book of the movement was *Flying a Red Kite*, then Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*. There were the two Clarke-Irwin collections, plus the early House of Anansi books — collections by Ray Smith and Dave Godfrey. Peggy Atwood was writing *The Edible Woman* during her year at Sir George Williams. Then

came *Sixteen By Twelve*, the first national collection. Then the Story-Teller; the first national performance group in fiction.

We were, however, a group very much of our time and place and class-interests: no French, no women, no unseemly minorities. When I think of our work, as opposed to Alice Munro's, for example, I see a line of continuity with the typical French-language Montreal *conte*. Our work has a similarity to that of Carrier, Vigneault, Ferron, and Tremblay, though we in no way consciously emulated them. Merely that the structures we accepted — a dramatic appeal to a tangible audience, a firm sense of place and voice and readership, a political and aesthetic intention — acted as a different confinement from the printed page. We were moving toward compression. It took me an inordinately long time to write my first novel (if indeed I ever have), the two Rays never have, and John (I suspect) is most at home in the novella form.

I should also acknowledge the influence on my work of Hugh Hood. His ease of delivery, the way he wraps allegorical significance around the keenly observed realistic core, the variety of his styles and voices, left me feeling one-dimensional and thin-voiced. It was Hugh who titled and could easily have written a story like "He Raises Me Up," and it was for Hugh that I attempted the supposedly casual-memoir form, such as "I'm Dreaming of Rocket Richard."

The Story Teller is now an obscure part of Canadian literary history. For me, it was the public manifestation of my inner maturing. I learned, in the group, that I still needed an ensemble; despite my immodest flights of fancy, I wasn't yet ready to stand alone. I always had the sense that of the five, I was the one the audience hadn't heard of, and I was the one they had to endure after the famous Hugh Hood and the sexy Ray Smith and the nasty John Metcalf and the whack-o Ray Fraser. So I learned to tame myself; to wait. Our time, each and separately, would come.

OUR EFFECT? WE ARE NOW at the age of the ageing rock stars of the sixties; our real fire is behind us but our best work is still to come. We're a little too grey and cranky to give collective readings. We've proven that prose on the podium is interesting and profitable; we've succeeded in stuffing Canadian literature into every cranny in the curriculum. And, I fear, we've lived to demonstrate the applicability of Murphy's Law to literary funding. Official money and government money will drive out private money. The bureaucracy will replace individual choice and initiative. The magic, the sense of occasion, the mystery of having a writer in your presence, of words made flesh — that is now beyond our students. The budget for such extravaganzas has all been lost. In the

way of benevolent bureaucracies, everyone gets something — a lot *less* of something — and the intangibles that truly meant something are lost.

We have lived to see a dangerous corollary to our hardest-won battles. It goes like this: if you're in the phone book and if you give readings, let's call you up and ask you to read. Anybody, anywhere. I've had calls from high school teachers a thousand miles away, asking if I wouldn't mind flying out and addressing a tenth-grade class. I've been at Canada Days and I've had my ticket punched down at Harbourfront in Toronto. This fall in my first long trip back to Canada in three years, I'm giving more than my upper limit of eight Canada Council-supported readings. I enjoy it. It's part of the whole fabric of Canadian life; it's what I dreamed, it's the literary equivalent of the CBC's own national mandate. But.

But this. Thirteen years ago our Sir George Williams poetry series had an equal mix of Canadian and American poets; now (I'll wager) if it has a series, they're all Canadian. Very few colleges in Canada have anything but Canadian readings. We had a two thousand dollar budget for our readings; we even budgeted our after-reading parties at seventy-five dollars for booze, breads, and meats. I remember the big pre-reading dinners at the best restaurants, and I remember the very well-attended, packed auditorium.

And now, I will be giving my readings this year at one o'clock in the afternoon, in a classroom. No lunch, no announcements. I remember the weeks it took, designing posters, picking them up at a printer's and then distributing them to Montreal's bookstores and cafés. Now there will be a xeroxed nine-by-twelve sheet of typing paper with a magic marker announcement of my reading, taped to the door and pinned to the cluttered bulletin board. There will be thirty students for my reading — the same attendance as the regular class. It *is* the regular class. The last evening reading I've given, significantly, was not at a university, but at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. What are we saying? Simply that people will not come out at night for a Canadian reading.

And, I fear, we suffer a surplus of Canadian talent. Alice Munro is an estimable writer and probably only second to Mavis Gallant as a writer of prose, but it's wrong that she alone should be the model for all short story writing by all women in this country. When I teach in Canada all I need are her books, Atwood's novels, and maybe one or two others (Kroetsch or Wiebe) depending on the region. There's something wrong when a Chinese-Canadian woman in Montreal has never heard of Maxine Hong Kingston, or a woman concerned with her Jewish background has not plunged beyond the sensibility of Mordecai Richler.

I once had the bizarre experience of being told that I could fly Audrey Thomas — a writer I admire greatly — to Montreal from Vancouver at Canada Council expense, but couldn't offer John Gardner a fifty-dollar bus fare from Bennington.

By that time, you see, Sir George Williams had given up its private budget for other exigencies, and Canada Council was picking up all the tabs.

Good sense and maturity will eventually triumph. Excess is never a cure for deficiency, and a less-charged time will permit both generosity and cosmopolitanism. Our little revolution of the sixties needs to be protected from too much success; it needs to build on the fact that Canadian Literature should not be an end in itself but only a tool of a larger Canadian Studies. We need to redirect a fraction of the honoraria and travel expenses now paid to keep a thousand poets and story-writers airborne to the dozens of world-stature authors out there in Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America as well as the United States who would be excited by the prospect of reading in Canada and instructing our students. Otherwise, our little revolution will die of boredom.

