

## THE FLOWERS THAT BLOOM IN L.A.

THE RECENT REPORT THAT there are now several hundred thousand Canadians living in Los Angeles, making it one of Canada's largest cities, is instructive on several counts. It testifies yet again to *Social Mobility In Our Time*; it says something about at least one dimension of Canadian taste; it is an implicit comment on our cultural flight from winter, echoed annually in Miami, Bridgetown, and Honolulu; and it hints at the slow Canadianization of the American media, which just may or may not be an illusion. That American cliché, the Great White North, was amply gored by the Canadian ironies of "Bob and Doug MacKenzie" — and one could tell they were Canadian ironies because they were self-reflexive, too, puncturing the defensive pompousness that the notion of the Great White North sometimes engenders in the Great Canadian soul. Totting up a list of Great Canadians in the American media has long been a cultural pastime, of course: from Mary Pickford to Donald Sutherland to SCTV and the writers for assorted films and comedy programmes (*Silver Streak*, Rosie Shuster), Canadians have managed somehow to affect the speech on centre stage even if they don't always occupy centre stage themselves. As various Royal Commissions have been told, these successes in the States (always we must pause to ask ourselves if we consider them successes *because* they take place in the States) tell of more than individual talent: they tell of the excellent training — and the limit on recognition — which the CBC and Canadian theatre experience have long been providing writers and actors.

But of course training and experience and even talent are not enough all by themselves. There are dangers of self-satisfaction in art as in any other human endeavour. We remind ourselves frequently of the dangers of a "recognition" that comes "too early," and of the problems that derive from reviewing each others' books. We insist, too — and rightly — not on the need to preserve a fixed Canadian culture but on the need to preserve the opportunity to express ourselves individually, thereby to give voice to the dynamics of the culture we have in common, and on the need to guarantee Canadian artists access to the Canadian

market. Such needs, given the international dynamics of marketing — which would minimize choice to maximize profit — require protective legislation of various kinds: guarantees of cultural opportunity to those Canadians who possess a cultural talent. But there's the catch. A cultural policy has to support and encourage quality, not guarantee support to mediocrity. And there is a point at which mechanical protectionism encourages mediocrity, for it erects barriers against stimulus rather than against takeover. Ideas cross borders; so does talent; so does imagination. And all can cross borders creatively — not to become impositions on the culture to which they travel, but to be absorbed and reanimated in the flux of the new.

Collaborating with L.A. — or New York or Miami — is of course no more a guarantee of quality than refusing to collaborate with L.A. The fact of working together is not the issue; access to creative stimulus is, and a sensible culture gives its artists the opportunity to express themselves partly by not imposing on their freedom of access to ideas and opportunities. Some of these ideas and opportunities do involve working together — actors and writers, for example, can learn from each other, from the stimulus of talent meeting talent. It is through such creative collisions, whether international or intranational, that cultures prosper. And there is a degree to which Canadians, who are perfectly capable of recognizing quality, have still to learn to welcome its presence among us, wherever it comes from. It's always possible the source might not be L.A.

Sometimes, moreover, the mere fact of coming from outside provides an extremely healthy degree of distance towards a cultural pretension; sometimes the Great White North needs to be satirized. And it certainly needs to be satirized more from within. We have able political cartoonists. And we have John Metcalf, whose devastating send-ups are too often taken for put-downs, too seldom recognized as the earnest, impatient side of a desire for Canadian culture to estimate accurately the qualities it possesses and the talents it has managed to foster. But of satirists in words there are too few; of distance towards ourselves we have too little; of distance between us, too much. Which is another reason that creativity in the various public media becomes yet again so important to us.

This is one of the reasons that of all new television programmes of recent months I so value that collaborative venture between the Muppets and Dennis Lee, *Fraggle Rock*. It is not just that the athletic versatility of the puppets and the joyful inventiveness of Lee's lyrics make good theatre; they are inventive for children and adults alike. And cautionary. Every week telling tales of the "fraggles" who live behind warehouse baseboards, the programme offers us a satiric glimpse of others and a creative distance from ourselves. In one early episode, the central characters, in the depths of depression, seek advice from the local oracle, an animate gypsy trash-heap named Margerie. Rising to her full height, Delphic, but

replete with banana skins, she intones: "For lonely, you need friends" — and the two brash rats that feed upon her presence pronounce in unequivocal conclusion, "The trash heap has spoken." We might remember that, when next our politicians speak. And it's advice to which even editorial writers have to listen. The trick is to choose one's prophetess clearly, to tell the difference between Margerie and Cassandra.

W.N.

## THE BALLAD OF THE HELL-HOUND

*George Faludy*

*translated by Arthur Koestler*

It happened last night. Some months ago  
the hell-hounds arrived: six monstrous beasts  
with a sergeant of the Secret Police. We couldn't  
care less. What were to us these creatures

amidst the camp's familiar features:  
watchtowers, pistols, barbed wire,  
machine guns and flame-throwers to boot?  
I can assure you we did not care a bit.

The cops selected some of our mates  
to impersonate the quarry, while they taught the hounds  
how to behave should any of the convicts  
entertain the notion of making for the gates.

"Hold the thief," they screamed and broke into a run  
in hot pursuit of the half-crazed fugitive.  
On reaching him they pulled in the dog's leash  
or else they didn't. On some nights I woke

on the rotting straw that was my nest  
to the sound of baying when they changed the guards.  
I learnt to shrug it off, like the rest.  
It surprised me nevertheless

that our guards were just as merciless  
in treating their savage allies to whip and belly-kick