editorial

ON VISIBILITY

"ETHNICITY" IS ONE OF those words that has sprung into general usage with several meanings, making lucid communication sometimes dubious. As a neutral word to describe any cultural subgroup, it has a nice sociological ring to it, redolent with fairness. But when I not so long ago heard a woman begin her comment on a radio phone-in programme by saying "I have a friend who's ethnic," I realized how quickly ordinary speech can reassign meaning. Clearly, no society loses its prejudices overnight, nor the people in it their expectations of cultural subgroups not their own. That phone-caller's assumptions, moreover, are given a more solid base than might seem logical in Canada by the way in which "ethnicity" is discussed, and by the parallel attitudes that underlie the term "multiculturalism." Although "multicultural" in Canada means more or less what it says (in the South Pacific, by contrast, it at least covertly and perhaps even openly means "multi-racial"), by focussing on the variety of ethnic sub-groups that exist in Canada *besides* the two main groups established by convention and constitution, the term effectively excludes English and French elements from consideration — or, by extension, from "ethnicity." Social scientists have terms for such processes of classification. They talk of "visible culture," or (as in the Multiculturalism issue of *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Spring 1982) of the " 'invisible' ethnics," in this case meaning the British, the Scandinavians, and the Germans, who have disappeared into the apparent "norm."

Whether it *is* a norm and whether they *have* disappeared are other questions. The Scots have scarcely been faceless in Canada, nor the Irish; Kitchener-Waterloo claims that Everyone is German there during Oktoberfest, but some of this is merely the theatre of ceremony at work. The "Vertical Mosaic" still enacts its family compacts, both in anglophone and francophone circumstances, and civil and military power in Canada remains in remarkably few hands. One might reasonably wonder to what degree Ethnic Studies merely record the majority's views of the minorities in what they see as "their" midst — or, pushed further,

wonder at what point claims for ethnic difference become transformed into lines of demarcation, boundaries of power and possibility.

Robert Kroetsch and others have noted (in *Canadian Ethnic Studies*' special "Ethnicity and Canadian Literature" issue) how, with Marlyn and Wiebe and Laurence and many others, "ethnic genealogy" has become an interest of many recent writers; but the subject has almost always been probed with an enfranchising rather than an enclosing purpose, intended to explain enough to close cultural divisions rather than to define the limits of an "acceptable" heritage and so the boundaries of prejudice. "Explaining" to others is, of course, often tantamount to "discovery" for oneself. Sometimes the desire for a past shows all the signs of the adopted child's quest for natural parents: motivated sometimes by the need to *know*, in order to corroborate independence, and sometimes by the fear of being separate or isolated, different or alone. The notion of having roots in a Civilization Elsewhere, and therefore of Being Civilized because (and perhaps *only* because) of the *historical* connection, confounds many people's attitudes to the past (and the society they identify, often sentimentally and inaccurately, with the past) and to the present as well (and the culture they could be shaping and sharing with their compatriots in the present). Many immigrants to a new land take not only their heritage with them but also their feuds, and whatever legal status they may acquire, they remain citizens of their old society as long as the feuds go on: they do disservice to the new. In Margaret Laurence's world, Manawaka serves as a crucible in which characters discover a lot about who-they-are-now by learning the limitations of defining themselves and their culture by who-they-were-then. It's a cautionary message as well as an enquiry into moral history, and worth learning from.

Bonnie J. Barthold's interesting book *Black Time* (Yale) shows another side to this question. Concerned with attitudes to time in the works of black writers, Barthold queries the very notions of *past* and *present* as black writers have inherited them — *or had imposed upon them* when European definitions of "civilization" came to be considered a "majority culture" for global empires. An oral (and within a European system a *"visible"*) culture, African society operated with a cyclic notion of time rather than a linear (or "historical") one, not unlike that which is available to Western writers in "myth." But, Barthold avers, as European norms began to define Africans from outside Africa, African culture was classified as somehow primitive: "freed" from its pagan reliance on myth, it was to European eyes still not imbued with "history," and so was cast adrift as a continent or culture of "developing" or transitional status, by definition of less consequence than their own. The polemical level to Barthold's book challenges the bias of this attitude; the critical level considers how black writers in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States have challenged this version of their history and made their cultural inheritance a literary virtue.

She might have added black Canadian writers, too, though there are only a few and though those few (Austin Clarke, for example) have largely emigrated from the West Indies. She might have pointed out, too, how non-black writers in the Caribbean have also had to investigate the implications of their rootedness, as does the Montreal-born Jamaican writer John Hearne in *The Sure Salvation* (Oxford), an account of the class distinctions as well as the racialism aboard the slaving ships; or *All of Papa's Children* (Cairi), by the late chief minister of Trinidad, Albert Maria Gomes, about the Portuguese minority in an Afro-Asian community. A kind of personal credo in Gomes' book sounds yet another note: "I refuse," he writes, " . . . to join the new diaspora of embittered nostalgics in their Canadian winters, Australian summers and desolate regressions to their once mother-country. Madeira exported Papa, and the way I see it, that's about as much exporting a family can take in a generation." It's an implicit critique of the kind of passage one finds, for example, in Cyril Dabydeen's story collection *Still Close to the Island* (Commoner's Publishing): in the falsely eloquent tropical tropes ("in the angle of virulent sun I watched her and dwelt on the vampire") or in the socially-blasting understated realism (" 'Where d'you come from?' Max was used to the question; used to being told no as well"). But if Gomes (or Gomes' character) might have disputed the emigration to Canada of writers like Barbados-born Clarke, Guyana-born Dabydeen, Tobago-born Lorris Elliott, or Trinidad-born Samuel Selvon, for him to prejudge their tone or their subject is once again to miss the point: to fail to see how visible ethnicity within a Western culture remains a challenge to social comprehension, and how the literature that enquires into such visibility will likely involve both nostalgia and confrontation.

These terms epitomize much about Canada's long relationship with the Caribbean in particular and with black people in general. As John N. Grant's *Black Nova Scotians* (N.S. Museum) points out, there were blacks in Canada as early as 1606, African slaves at Fort Louisbourg, and slave sales in Halifax; but attitudes to black people were also honed by the American Revolution and Civil War, for there were "Black Loyalists" to praise and "fugitive slaves" to aid — perhaps at least as much for political reasons, at the time, as for humanitarian ones. Many of the books that have taken account of the presence of black people in Canada have been anecdotal as well as documentary, from Benjamin Drew's *Narratives of the Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (1856), through Robin Winks' *The Blacks in Canada* (1971) and Crawford Kilian's *Go Do Some Great Thing: Black Pioneers in British Columbia* (1978), to John Grant's *Black Nova Scotians*. Two other recent books are Michael Bradley's *The Black Discovery of America* (Personal Library) which tries to prove — with what it calls "amazing evidence," of the *Chariots of the Gods* sort — that African mariners crossed the Atlantic in prehistoric times, and Daniel G. Hill's *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Book Society). Together these books tell of a border-crossing escapee who arrived

disguised as a Quaker woman, of the Niagara Underground Railroad, of successful boxers, singers, preachers, and teachers, of military participation, and of the importance of the Baptist Mission schools in educating black children; they also tell of failures: of famine in the late 18th century, which led many freed slaves to seek greater freedom in Sierra Leone, of the shipment of three boatloads of Maroons to Canada to try to resolve a *Jamaican* political problem, and of failed economic experiments. There were also failed political experiments involving a possible trade-off (Canada for Guadeloupe) between England and France, and the possible union between Canada and various British Caribbean colonies. It appears that when race didn't get in the way, economics did, as it has from early on. An article in the Spring 1981 issue of the *Dalhousie Review* records how British attempts in the post-Revolutionary years to contain the new United States by limiting its trade routes — by instituting an enclosing trade connection between Nova Scotia and the Caribbean — failed, on the one hand, because of a lack of Nova Scotian capital and surplus food, and on the other because it was the illicit trade between the United States and the British West Indies between 1783 and 1802 that helped the Caribbean recover from its economic doldrums. A similar story is told, about another era, in Jacques Mathieu's academic treatise *Le Commerce entre la Nouvelle-France et les Antilles au XVIII^e siècle* (Fides); after a slow start, trade was developing rapidly in the 1750's between Quebec and the Caribbean (mostly with Guadeloupe and Santa Domingo), with fishoil, coal, animals, peas, and flour being exchanged for sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton. But there were legal problems, and political ones; after Bigot imposed an embargo on the export of wood, the trade routes essentially became economic history.

Such routes have perhaps been reopened in recent years not by fishoil and sugar alone but also by cultural discovery and cultural exchange. Journals like *Ariel* (Calgary), *WLWE* (Guelph), *The Toronto South Asian Review*, and *Ecriture française dans le monde* (Sherbrooke) all provide a context for Canadian literature that is larger than Europe or North America; Canadian publishers are publishing West Indian writers (Talonbooks, for example, recently released Lennox Brown's *The Twilight Dinner and Other Plays*, a set of ironic comedies and private tragedies in a non-paradisal, NFL-and-supermarket-and-Diana-Ross-dominated culture); Canadian writers (Atwood, Birney, Ryga, Mandel, Purdy, Pat Lane, Diane Giguère, and D. G. Jones) are imaginatively visiting the Caribbean and Latin America and writing out their observations and understandings of their acquired sense of Otherness; Caribbean writers are responding to Canada, both as a stereotype of opportunity and as a palpable economic presence in their own midst; and writers of Caribbean origin, writing in Canada, are making an enormously vital literary territory out of their substantial ethnic heritage. They are writing out of their awareness, too, of the pressures that sometimes attend social visibility. We can learn from such enterprises more about how Canadian

society changes and about how it sometimes resists change, and about how culture, politics, and economics intertwine. For in their continuing endeavour to establish both their international separateness and their international visibility, Canadians have still to remember these interconnections, to remember that separateness does not have to mean the severing of all links with other worlds and other people's values, and that acquiring an international cultural presence is also a political gesture and an economic act.

W.N.

FABRIZIO

Irving Layton

for William Goodwin

Fabrizio is wise. The stars tell him all
he needs to know: that foreplay ends in boredom
or despair, that greed and lust agitate
the treacherous ant heaps till disaster comes
to smash them with the conqueror's thicker heel.
He scans the heavens for sense and there finds none,
nor in his wife's scrawny arms and devotions;
sons can disappoint but see him rally
to advance a nephew's human need for gold,
a fair face; recollection and desire
stirring the embers in his slack loins
till a scholar's self-irony snuffs out
the small flame licking at his groin
to leave him seedy before the noble's choice
'twixt sex and death: knowing the choice is each man's
to the very end though the priests and Father Pirrone
rave and wave their superstitious crucifixes
to scare satyrs back to their forbidden wolds
and the diseased bourgeois deed his estates
to the cretinous son, the spoilt daughters.

Cuba
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