

ANOTHER DECADE

WE ARE SCARCELY TWO YEARS into the 1980's, and already the decade seems to have settled on its character. Compared with the 1960's, that age of protest and plenty, when people accepted the myth of progress and turned it for awhile into a temporary reality, this decade is marked by paucity and plaint. The governing reality — perhaps equally temporary, but not yet mythological — is retrenchment. The reaction to it is instructive: an anger on the part of ordinary people at being cheated out of an equitable share in what is still one of the world's richest societies. But perhaps Canada is richer in resources than in its responsibility for managing them, richer in expectations than in application, richer in wish than in will. The idea of progress in the 1960's was born of the expectations of the numbers of people then entering their maturity, who still had their aspirations and the rumbling energy of youth; but a lot of that fades, and whether there is real paucity or not in the 1980's, there is at the very least a disparity of distribution, born of hunger for power, disappointment in power, plain avarice, and simple greed. How to react? Many people, with nostalgia, are turning now (for confirmation of their strength to persevere, as much as anything) to the desperate unity of spirit and the erratic vices and luxuries of those other socially and economically chequered decades, the 1920's and 1930's. With what result remains yet to be seen. Or felt.

But how can we characterize that amorphous swift decade of the 1970's, which was In-Between? Those large numbers of youths for whom society has never been ready found that society was not ready for them when they turned twenty, either. They went to the land, came back from the land, and suddenly turned thirty; their friends joined the establishment, their children started school, and their several governments sold their land away. They traded in their dream of simplicity, many of them, for a dream of possession, but found that as hard as the other to achieve; and their younger siblings, more conservative all, began to nudge them ruthlessly into middle age. The decade was nationalist, for some of the same reasons that the generation was self-expressive: not out of ego so much

as out of a determination to set one self apart from the pack — with all the enthusiasm, rightful pride, competitive impulse, bias, and talent for distortion of which people in Canada, like people everywhere, are endlessly, repeatedly capable. During the 1970's, years of celebration and public protest turned overnight into years of theatre and public mime. Cults acquired respectability. Superstitions were enshrined. Rock turned into punk, with all the cynicism that comes from using commerce as a means of rebellion against the ordinary, and both rock and punk were overtaken by New Wave, which turned out to be just another old wave coming back, another new-found way of looking backwards into the future.

Canadian literature during the decade gives no clearer picture of its time — nor any less composite a picture. Any gallery of characters has to be able to show a substantial range: Hodgins' caricatures, Munro's sketches, Laurence's myth-makers, Davies' myth-markers, Atwood's partly liberated persons, Cohen's partly liberated parsons, Beaulieu's phantoms, Gallant's ghosts, Ferron, Tremblay, Hébert, Hood, half a dozen split personae, and a bear. Looking carefully at all of them together, we can begin to see the patterns of a transitional period develop: the blush of expectation begin to fade, the lines of a generation's disenchantment (with its country, with itself) set in. In literature, life stops being an open field of possibility and turns into a closed theatre for role-playing and role-breaking. More and more, people in books call attention to themselves as characters in books, re-enacting tales rather than enacting lives. Repeatedly Beauty meets the Beast, draws on, draws back, or draws away. For one writer, men become minotaurs and all the world a maze that defies a woman ever to find her way to freedom; for another, women are hermaphrodites and dragons; for a third, sexuality is a trap for the unwary and the unready, a process that takes the threats and promises of fairytale and springs them alive. *I*-narratives perform desperate quests for meaning and love in a world where love belongs to a lost past, where meaning exists only in magic, where only the self is real and the self seems sometimes mad. Reality is terror, however sublimated, nothing more.

Not that all optimism has disappeared — Davies continues to be unfashionably articulate, Hodgins to be unfashionably positive, Gordon Korman to be unfashionably cheerful: it's just that one has today to use the word "unfashionably" with such epithets. Perhaps it's a question of expectation still. Our realism has long been a Canadian mode, and trading in the old realism on the magic new kind has not robbed it of all its dourness; in the 1970's it simply takes on a new form. The reflexive stances of so much writing of the time (a pattern continued into the 1980's, clearly) mean that the severity is often directed back into the novel form, back against the process of authorship, back against the *I*. Whether it is punitive, guilefully playful, or merely cautionary, the stance calls attention to itself; as the self-consciousness is often an act of deliberate self-deception, willed illusion against the pressures of insight, roles are in constant flux, both inside the

work and outside in connection with it. Hence at one remove from the actual writing, the author becomes critic and the critic becomes author. For such literature less shares its meaning than requires interpretation, requires the reader's involvement in the act of decoding its signs — perhaps for the pleasure of the puzzle's challenge, but perhaps to discover only that the signs are all that exist for an author, that behind the tower of verbal masks and marks that delineates life, there lies no meaning at all.

I am led to these dour reflections in part by trying to sort out the enthusiasms and disappointments of 1970's literature, and in part by my response to W. O. Mitchell's new novel (and best book since *Who Has Seen the Wind* in 1947), *How I Spent My Summer Holidays* (Macmillan), a tale of childhood and memory which the author has taken some years to write. It is set in 1924 and is an apparently straightforward narrative about the extraordinary summer of a 12-year-old boy named Hugh. But appearance lies. Hugh's happy home, his many friends, his smalltown prairie summer, his religious training, his adult guides: all are illusions, acts of make-believe which his society performs for him — which only memory can sort out, reinterpret, and reject. The book comes out of the stance of the 1970's, that is; not merely is innocence lost, but so is possibility, because a generation of adults promises what it does not provide, acts by rules it ostensibly rejects, suppresses information that would enlighten its children, and thereby warps lives that can never quite be young.

There is much that is funny and satiric in the book — the elaborateness of boys' schemes of adventure and the hypocrisy of religion are the chief wellsprings and targets of Mitchell's laughter — but there is little that is gentle. This is not *Who Has Seen the Wind* a few years later. Behind the upright masks of the townspeople there exists a harder cast of truth, one which Mitchell's plays of the 1970's — *Back to Beulah*, for example — come closer to showing than does *Who Has Seen the Wind* or *The Kite*. Here the rural is not bucolic. In the town's insane asylum, the inmates rage or wander blindly, unattended except by other madmen; liquor sales and prostitution prosper, among the Solid Citizens as well as among the rest; the wife of the town's chief authority figure makes lesbian advances, both welcome and unwelcome, to other characters; and all manner of violence thrives. Though he telegraphs his plot too clearly for the events that follow to be a surprise, Mitchell brings all of these strains together — madness, which 12-year-old Hugh sees as a child's game, until it moves too close to him; alcohol, which he sees as an adult adventure; and sexuality, which is even more a mystery in himself than it is in the world he sees around him — in a climactic scene of murder, revenge, and wrongful blame. The child's game stops, for it has never in fact been a game; his world closes; and the theatre of cruelty in which he has played his part keeps on, leading to further madness and more suppression, all beyond his control.

There are a lot of conventions in the book — secret caves, shallow graves, stereotypical characters and confrontations among them — but Mitchell asks us to see past them all, to see the way they always persist to disguise the truth in life. Even the title is an invitation to this end. “How I Spent My Summer Holidays” — that wretched essay topic of everyone’s first day back to school — is a secret subject for Hugh, one he is not allowed to talk about during the fact, and not allowed to admit after; because of his violent summer, all his youth is wasted, spent. And most of his life after, too. For subsequent events do not modify his society. The innocent madmen are killed or left in a state of paralysis; the parents die; the friends, who were never truly friends, turn into their parents, with the same sleazy hypocrisies; war and sex become bitter games of power and role-playing; and Hugh goes away. But the novel is cast as a frame story, inviting readers to notice the form as well as the tale, to read the past methodically, to enter with Hugh into a dialogue with memory, seeking a sanctuary he only thought he once had, a love he can only hope to believe in still. There is no order to be gleaned from history, he finds, no comfort in accurate memory, no salvation in recognition; perhaps all Hugh can salvage from experience is enough understanding to feed the will to hope. That’s small, as signs of renewal go. But perhaps it’s a message with a little meaning for writers in decades to come.

W.H.N.

NOTICE

While I was writing this editorial, “retrenchment” caught up with *Canadian Literature*. Paper and publishing costs have risen — the inflation in paper prices far outstripping the national average. In April 1982, postage costs for journals take a massive leap. In July 1982, the University of B.C., which has helped support *Canadian Literature* since 1959, is forced to reduce its grant significantly. All of which means that as of June 1982, single copies of *Canadian Literature* will cost \$7.50. In January 1983, annual subscription rates will rise. An individual subscription will cost \$20.00 a year, an institutional subscription \$25.00 a year, plus \$5.00 postage outside Canada.