

BENEATH THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

CANADA LONG AGO designed itself as the “peaceable kingdom,” and as Laurie Ricou observes, in his essay on Tim Findley’s *The Wars in Violence in the Canadian Novel since 1960* (Memorial University), the myth still holds its grasp on Canadian imaginations. Violence seems a world apart, or at least a border away — lodged most formally in foreign wars and television. But as the book and the essay both go on to make clear, while the myth exerts its own impact on Canadian realities, there are fiercer and more violent kingdoms which always lie beneath the placid (other commentaries read *provincial, puritan, tedious, cold*) surfaces of Canadian life. We might bewail such disruptive potential; or alternatively we might embrace the promise it carries of a stirring, vital energy. Either way, the stance is aloof, full of categorizing detachment or wishful thinking and therefore vulnerable to the power of the violence itself. As Sandra Djwa in the same volume astutely observes about Alice Munro, everyone might at some point want to show a savage face, but no-one chooses the time; it’s only at the unexpected time, in the special, lurid, unreal place, that the hallucinatory presence of the Enemy appears.

Munro’s characters find out their vulnerability the way everyone else does, after the fact; hence they can be wounded from within as well as from without, at war with themselves as well as with the world they guard themselves against. This distinction runs all the way through *Violence in the Canadian Novel*. Edited by Virginia Harger-Grinling and Terry Goldie, the book collects a set of papers that were destined for delivery at a Newfoundland conference, but which were never given, because fog invaded St. John’s. One speculates a little on the discussions that might have taken place had the contributors managed to reach their destination, for there is an implicit dialogue going on in the papers by themselves, between the critics (like Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Smart) who accept violence as a psychological manifestation, those (like Kim MacKendrick and Jack Warwick, writing on humour and joul) who write about the formal shapes it takes, and those (like Robin Mathews) who probe the concrete and political realities of contemporary warfare. Patricia Smart talks about violence as a feminist

metaphor, about invasion and territoriality as revelations of women's understanding of male notions about relations between the sexes. What she says about the work of Louky Bersianik applies to a number of other contemporary writers as well, as diverse as Marie-Claire Blais and Susan Musgrave; and what Mathews says about the politics of Buller and Rohmer and what he calls "the Corporation novel" applies forcefully to certain relations among institutional groups both within the country and between countries. But therein lies the difference in emphasis: Smart focusses internally, taking life as the shaping force behind the forms of fiction, and Mathews externally, taking fiction as a commentary on political realities. She probes the forms that literature *enacts*, he the issues that literature *is about*, and for all the overlap between the two positions, for all the political fervour they share, there is little resolution to the essential difference between them, nor any reason why one should seek any. Ricou, who finds *The Wars* to be less about World War I than about how the reader is required to think about war, less about the obscenity of violence than about the "storymaking of the reader," explains the interrupted syntax of Findley's novel by the implicit message it enacts: "confronted by willful violence the mind stammers." In the peaceable kingdom it is a way of acknowledging the broken surfaces. Mathews, impatient because a commitment to a political cause, to political action, does not follow, dismisses the novel as self-indulgent. Accepting a loser's role is self-indulgent, he says; "floating through slaughter" is self-indulgent; anarchy is self-indulgent. Yet can one ask writers to chart a more positive course? Explicitly Mathews says yes: not by condemning violence, but by condemning violence-as-a-private-indulgence: the "discipline" of a public cause has, by this view, a greater worth, which literature should serve, and presumably by which the worth of literature should itself be measured.

Those critics who disagree do not spell out in detail their disagreement. A phrase from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* articulates the challenge they face: declaring the need for revolutionary measures and dismissing the degree to which establishments call upon tradition and order, Fanon writes that "the man of culture, instead of setting out to find" the "fundamental substance" of his society, "which itself is continually being renewed," "will let himself be hypnotized by . . . mummified fragments which because they are static are in fact symbols of negation and outworn contrivances." The trick is to prevent the attraction to "constant renewal" from opening up a greater vulnerability; if one system proves static, the charms of a new one do not guarantee it will not prove equally static and perhaps even more confining — which has always been the dilemma the liberal faces and one of the chief reasons that conservative philosophers like George Grant have challenged the liberal position. Espousing change, the liberal seeks meaning in change. But what if meaning proves elusive? "When there is no language," Ricou writes, "there is violence and void." By which means

The Wars becomes a kind of cautionary training in the politics of epistemological argument and so a book with meaning after all.

As though in commentary, Robert Kroetsch in the same volume observes another feature of the relation between Canadian literature and Canadian society: "The theory of answers, for us, is a dangerous one. We must resist endings, violently. And so we turn from content to the container; we turn from the tale to the telling. It is form itself, traditional form, that forces resolution. In our most ambitious writing, we do violence by doing violence to form." At one level this comment can be taken to reiterate the justification of joul as a political written medium as well as an idiomatic spoken form. At another, it refers to something far more general, not to the way language communicates politics but to the way politics shapes language and gives to a writer the cultural resonances of his (or *her*) separate voice. Silence, that apparent denial of language which Ricou equates in Findley's work with violence and void, Kroetsch sees as the probable outcome of any system (like that which Fanon observes in a colonial society) where the language of the social structure is in conflict with the realities of the people, *but he does not accept it as the final step in the process of change*. To any true creator, silence is not a resolution, Kroetsch writes, but an invitation, a provocation to speech and therefore to storytelling. Violence done to form thus becomes not a witless or malicious act of annihilation but a deliberate contrivance to enforce fresh seeing. Yet even the language here begs the issue: how *creative* can *forced* sight be? For the silence is never so complete that language enters it without trailing associations; here the metaphor of violence carries with it the knowledge of violent realities, and the obscenity of violence-in-reality confounds the metaphor. Commitment to causes perhaps justifies for some a de-creative process. Perhaps a commitment to the continuing, renewing dream of the peaceable kingdom — *sans* the discriminatory politics of corporate accountsmanship — justifies for others their inability to separate violence from obscenity.

In another context, *Mosaic's* fine "Beyond Nationalism" issue (14, no. 2, subtitled "The Canadian Literary Scene in a Global Perspective"), Kroetsch tacitly acknowledges the attractions of the Canada he attaches himself to, if not the Imperial notion of Canada that historians for generations purveyed as objective fact. Observing that complex genealogies constitute a narrative pattern of 1970's fiction in Canada, he writes: "Our genealogies are the narratives of a discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even. We wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions." Fanon in the 1960's was a spur to many Third World Nations to release themselves from their imperial masters and the biases of the imperial tongue that their own new literature inevitably, perhaps unconsciously, was using. Kroetsch's call to articulate the "impossible sum" of Canada is a comparable challenge to resist the biases of a single tradition and to explore the possibilities

that a multiple heritage bequeaths to literary convention. "Locating a dislocation" is, in the context of *violence* . . . perhaps a "violent" act, at least metaphorically; it uncreates a notion of "English" Canada so that a creative notion rooted in the actualities of Canadian pluralism might find suitable expression. Presumably *an* expression, rather than *expression* alone, and presumably not necessarily violent in either its idiom or its subject — because if there is only one expression for the new society to discover, only one "sum" for the writer to master, then the dislocation has restricted more than freed the creative act, and the much-vaunted plurality proved culturally empty. In a way it is to clarify the plurality that *Mosaic's* "Beyond Nationalism" issue has come together, though there are two quite different notions lying behind the articles: an impatience with an acceptance of any single line of literary inheritance governing Canadian tradition, and an irritation with criticism which deals with Canadian texts in isolation from literature outside Canada. The results vary. Though there are to be found here some conventional retellings of certain Canadian literary myths, there are also several important articles: Barbara Godard connecting *As For Me and My House*, by French critical method, to British literary movements; Sherrill Grace contrasting Pynchon with Kroetsch, in an analysis at once textual and contextual; Janet Giltrow contrasting Mrs. Moodie in Canada with Mrs. Trollope in America, and distinguishing between the language of the settler and the language of the genteel onlooker: "Where Traill's prose stops at small particulars, Moodie's rides on, along an abstract plane of diffuse enthusiasm." Curiously, however, "beyond nationalism" seems in practice to mean that Canadian writing should involve comparison with American texts; the few exceptions seek British and French *influences*, and no-one seeks Asian sources, Commonwealth parallels, or Third World influences and analogues. As Kroetsch implies, the sum is greater and the genealogy more complex than the British-French-American triad implies. John Matthews' exploration of the Canadian-Commonwealth connection, which appeared in the *Humanities Association Review* in 1979 (vol. 30, no. 4), is the sort of article one has to read in tandem with this issue of *Mosaic*. It also offers some degree of perspective on Kroetsch's argument, though indirectly — for Matthews expresses a clear regret that the "stability of a central national idea" should in the twentieth century have dissipated. Yet he goes on to find in the literatures of the Commonwealth examples of cultures neither retreating nor despairing in the knowledge that the centre cannot hold, but experimenting in the "new" and the "flexible" instead, which is the conclusion that, by different routes, Kroetsch and Margaret Laurence have also come to, declaring Canada's attitudinal if not economic Third World status.

In the same issue of the *Humanities Association Review*, there appear other perspectives on nationalism: on Quebec's rejection of both English-Canadian and European French social models; on distinctions between the sacred and

profane as they affect definitions of social identity; and on the historical connections between the U.S.A. and Canada which underlie the literary attitudes of the 1970's. About Canadian cultural plurality, moreover, George Rawlyk writes that over time Canadians have learned "to integrate two quite different, but not incompatible levels of identity and to move easily back and forth between these positions." This point is one to keep in mind when reading George Woodcock's recent *The Meeting of Time and Space: Regionalism in Canadian Literature* (NeWest), which dismisses the idea of a centralist government in Canada, declares that all the important innovative tendencies of English-Canadian literature originated in the regions, and argues that for these reasons Canada should institute a Swiss canton system, which is a true confederation. This argument goes awry at two points, I think: first in its notion of "region," which presumes a centre to be a region of, and second in its failure to take account of the dual allegiance that is built into Canadians' notion of their political culture, which makes the canton system as foreign to Canadian notions of Confederation as is the Centralist notion of American or French politics. The dualism is part of the indirectness that Canadian literature so recurrently employs, the subsurface irrationality it appeals to; and part of the curious state of the national health derives from the fact that Canadians use their access to, and control over, two different governments, federal and provincial, to balance the two. For *both* governments, complete with opposition parties, represent the *people*. Citizens do not elect their regional, provincial government to be their representative at the federal level; they elect federal officials for that purpose. And they do not elect a federal government to centralize authority, but to *co-ordinate* federal matters, so that in any one province or region (and most provinces have many regions, in both strictly literary and more largely cultural terms) citizens will have access to the shared culture and the rights of the whole.

There is a difference, in other words, between a notion of region which implies a central authority over the whole, and a notion of region which implies a parallel access to the whole. The difference shows up in other forms in Fanon's rejection of the biases of European languages, because they constitute (or presume) an authority he cannot accept, and in John Matthews' comments on the flexibility of Commonwealth literary forms, as demonstrations of the separate development of English literatures around the world, which have access to but need not declare obeisance to a notion of a solitary great tradition. In another form still, the distinction appears as the basis for Andrew Gurr's *Writers in Exile* (Harvester) which coincidentally has two different subtitles on the cover and the title page — either "The Identity of Home" or "The Creative Use of Home" in *Modern Literature*. Concerned to explain why some writers have become "creative exiles" in the prose they write in the twentieth century, Gurr traces in a series of biocritical essays the growing sense of exile and the growing admission

of the importance of the childhood home in the lives and work of Mansfield, Naipaul, Ngugi, and others. Far and away strongest on Mansfield, and weakest in some throwaway references to Wiebe and Gordimer in a concluding postscript, the book explores the paradox that exile becomes for these writers. The products of "*Gemeinschaft*" — the closeknit but colonial, provincial community — they seek to experience "*Gesellschaft*" — the urban, impersonal, individualistic, and "metropolitan" culture that represents artistic vitality to them. Inevitably disappointed because they cannot belong, they increasingly explore their own exile, creating out of it a realistic prose world more preoccupied with social concerns than with the aesthetics of writing. Though Mansfield and Joyce are a little hard to fit into this last generalization, it is interesting nonetheless, not the least for how it relates to the distinction in Canadian letters between those concerned with formal process and those concerned with social referents. The *Gesellschaft*-born, Gurr writes, are typically poets — more concerned with aesthetic form than with social function, that is, and less concerned than the *Gemeinschaft*-born with trying to represent concretely the shape of a society that lies outside the metropolitan norm. What greater reference to Canadian and Australian examples would have done in this book is to illustrate how notions of region and centre, or province and metropolis, have been in constant flux during the last hundred and more years. Perhaps poets-in-prose emerge when a region becomes its own metropolis, when a society no longer seeks (or needs) to ratify its own existence against another people's norms, or when (in Kroetsch's terms) a "dislocation" has been found and told.

Gurr adds that the detachment such exiles seek from their native community, as an escape from solipsism, does not guarantee them freedom, if only because it is also a pose. But it takes a peculiarly twentieth century and peculiarly provincial form because the writers who seek detachment seem to worry so pervasively about it. That is always the colonial's dilemma. Of posing and subjectivity, by contrast, there is plenty in the British traveller abroad — as Paul Fussell makes both vivid and clear in *Abroad*, his account of British travelling between 1918 and 1939. Though the book looks at the work of Douglas, Lawrence, Waugh, Isherwood, Orwell, and others, the centrepiece is Robert Byron, traveller, author of *The Road to Oxiana*, Blimpish poseur, quintessential Englishman, and neo-Wildean anecdotalist who dismissed other people's nationalisms with the insularity born of his own "*Gemeinschaft*" birth: "There is something absurd about a land frontier." As Fussell argues, the perspective was also one made possible by the isolation of the lands that travellers visited during these years, and engendered by the dislocating experience of World War I. In the post-World War II years, relative isolation no longer exists in the world, Fussell says. From an age of exploration, when the aim of the voyager was to risk the formless and the unknown, we have come through the age of the traveller to the age of

the tourist, whose aim is only to move to “the security of pure cliché.” In a telling distinction, Fussell adds another impediment: “One who has hotel reservations and speaks no French is a tourist.” But in a way it is the fact of war which makes the travel book, that “trope of a generation,” no longer possible for the British. The end of one war may have sprung them into movement — away from an England that shaped them but which they no longer trusted, motivated by “the compensatory principle by which the trench sensibility finds itself propelled vigorously toward the tropics.” But the next war robbed them also of their distance. Journeys abroad became journeys into combat, and another kind of literary age began.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Fussell has also argued that the twentieth century made the truly realistic war novel possible because changes in taste and time (which allowed obscenities to appear openly on the page) made it thereby possible to render directly the larger obscenity of war itself. It is a relative argument. Given taste and time, the rendered obscenities lose much of the shock force that suppression accords them. Perhaps that, more than any other single reason, is why in books or on film or in daily life, violence becomes more grotesque, more open, less restrained, more obscene. The more difficult it is to shock, the more outrageous will be the attempts to do so. And will do so. For true obscenity does not lie in language, but in behaviour. To comprehend this is to begin to understand not only why literary violence has become so prevalent in recent years, but also why in its various guises it should have such different effects. The violence of language is an artifice of mind, which engages and convinces another mind only as long as it also argues and creates; the detached observation of violence is a neutral act — disenchanting, perhaps, but also disengaging; but the vision of violence that surrenders to violence is full of the millenarian power to persuade irrationally. It is a gospel of destruction, and in that there is danger — for it makes of all human contacts violent engagements, it removes creativity from the gallery of human skills, and it undermines the social contract that keeps us a people.

“The acute sense of place that attended travel between the wars has atrophied,” Fussell writes. The sense of a whole society and the belief in the worth of the shared space that is worth preserving to share with another generation: these aspirations for a peaceable kingdom, these, too, can atrophy. An adequate renewal will not emerge from any falsification of a society’s flaws, but neither will it emerge from a lame acceptance, literary or otherwise, that violence — far from being merely the stuff of entertainment or the projection of troubled lives — constitutes the only norm that gives meaning to the life we say we want to live.

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