

WILDERNESS AND OTHER HIDDEN FACES

SOME WEEKS AGO, looking through a stack of books that came to *Canadian Literature* for review, I chanced upon one that from a quick glance at its cover — fairytale prince and conventional green frog — I took to be a children's tale. But an equally quick glance inside caught this passage:

Then you place your left hand on their right knee, and ask them "What is your experience of the *opposite* of that?" They will access whatever is the opposite, for them. As the changes occur, again you increase the pressure as you see the changes until they plateau, and then lift your hand off.

Then you have two anchors. What we want you to do is use one. . . . It works even better if you distract your partner's consciousness with something neutral. . . .

Seeking clarification, I looked at the cover again: *Frogs Into Princes* (Hurtig). But then the tell-tale subtitle: *Neuro Linguistic Programming* — and I put the book down, reflecting petulantly on the swift corruption that computer science has spread through the language, and on the disparity between a cover and the book that is hidden inside.

And yet something still nagged. Was there a connection after all between the world of fairytale and the world of programmed response: response even of the sorts being condemned (yet in a different way also cultivated) by this book, a tape from a psychotherapy workshop? How does the language we learn dictate the faces we put on? How do we transform words into talismans and invest them with magic? Why do we attribute a power to words, when the power to associate and understand lies within ourselves? Words generate responses, we say — such as my own animosity toward the programmer's verb *to access* — but clearly words do not generate out of themselves: *we* are the ones whose minds generate meaning. The responses are associational. And the attribution of a magical power to language declares as much as anything the human desire to give a name and an image to the equally human capacity to imagine the unknown and to make connections between the hidden and the seen.

The trouble with thinking about the nature of association, however, is that all things begin to associate. Another review book, for example, offered scarcely a challenge in this regard: Anthony Hopkins' *Songs from the Front and Rear* (Hurtig) came complete with a (clear) plastic wrapper and the publisher's bold disclaimer NOT MEANT FOR CHILDREN. The seal, of course, has the effect of associationally raising an item's presumed quality ("Everything in a glass case is valuable," thinks one of Janet Frame's characters, restrictively), and the disclaimer that of heightening curiosity. This time, at least, the subject is obvious: Hopkins' book contains 192 pages of unexpurgated Canadian servicemen's songs from World War II. Depending on the "programme" one brings to such words as they use, these songs are funny, bawdy, coarse, offensive, degrading, or all of the above; certainly they offer different readers a slice of history, a nostalgic journey, a short course in musical exaggeration. And it would be easy to make either too much or too little of them. Too much, if one ignores their surface existence: they are soldiers' songs, mostly bawdy, which were sung as rituals, elaborate jokes, and for entertainment. But too little, if one ignores altogether the element of ritual they enact, the fact that bawdiness was often a group's only acceptable outlet for the expression of longing and need, and that bravado and bravura often hide (transparently here) many surprising moments of tenderness and quiet emotion.

Several books of photographs offer yet another glimpse of the character hidden behind public images. Two in a handsome regional series from Oxford — called *British Columbia* and *Montreal and Its Countryside* — offer an interesting contrast with each other. Robert Harlow's text about B.C. stresses the constancy of wilderness, which he finds both in the place and in the (rare) people Paul von Baich has photographed against a wilderness setting; Luc d'Iberville-Moreau stresses the village roots of the Montreal that Michel Drummond evokes visually. But the images that recur in each book cumulatively suggest more than such direct themes; they constitute ways of perceiving the world outside, which in turn articulate different senses of communal attitude and communal image. Von Baich's images are all natural masks: fog rising against an "impenetrable" forest, fog in a city park, high cloud, low cloud, snowbank, sunset squall, and steam. Drummond's enact an iconography of flesh and stone: children on streets; women in churches, in windows, on posters; men over coffee cups, in factories, on bicycles, selling vegetables, working the land; and whenever no people appear to be present, one finds in these Montreal photographs a statue of the virgin, reminding the onlooker of the human and daily dimensions of moral aspiration. In either case, surfaces are illusory. One book asserts, perhaps, the godliness of aspiration in human beings, the other the humanity of God. One suggests that its idiom is elliptical, the other that the communal language is symbolic. (Consider Jack Hodgins' comment: "if symbols don't work, . . . [t]hen eternity can only be expressed by implication. . . ." Both books make meaning out of location.

By contrast, a work like Anthony Hocking's *New Brunswick* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson) exists for a different purpose. It is an elementary illustrated text; its meaning — like an encyclopedia entry's — lies on the surface; its value consists in its accuracy. Providing little sense of the author or the psychology of the place, however, it also exists for the moment only, and before long its pictures will seem curiously dated. But not yet so dated that in a different context they will seem gloriously evocative of their time. Consider works like Graham Metson's *The Halifax Explosion* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson) or Edward Cavell's *Journeys to the Far West* (Lorimer). Cavell's collection of photographs from three decades (1860's-1880's), happily dovetailed with excerpts from travellers' writings, displays the art of photography at a time when it was grappling with moments of movement. Repeatedly we see images — of roads, Indians, troops, forces, masks — and repeatedly we catch glimpses of human eyes peering out of the masks, of faces that turn when the camera shutter opens: declaring the vitality of the subject, and at the same time blurring our perception of external details. The book's closing image of grave totems, open-eyed and open-mouthed, becomes an enormously evocative symbol, then. The masks live; they see and speak. But of what reality? And to what end?

Metson's Halifax miscellany also gathers photos, journals (the complete text of Archibald MacMechan's official report, "The Halifax Disaster," among them), and public government data, but here, though the photographs document tangible, painful episodes of human experience, the fascination is as much with the almost oral history — the nearness to sources, to voices — as with the frozen images. As in Bruce West's revised *Toronto* (Doubleday), a popular history devoted to showing how the city grew into "one of the most exciting . . . of the continent while living down various rather embarrassing circumstances concerning its birth and rise to great stature," the merit lies in its evocation of persons. In *Toronto*, much direct quotation from newspapers and other documents gives life once again to the city's actual inhabitants: the Simcoes, the runaway slaves, the people in local theatricals, the Americans, the rebels, the famous visitors on lecture circuits, and the not-so-famous who faced the cholera epidemics and carved the laconic grave-stones. Curiously, the closer West gets to the present — to the merchandisers, the mayors, and the freeway planners — the more bureaucracy overtakes person. Quotations from life give way to assertions about stature. Frogs into princes. But we never learn how the princes really live.

When Tony Cashman (*A Picture History of Alberta*, Hurtig) shows us yet another picture of a poster, we get a parallel insight into the growth of a culture; it says: "YOUR INCOME would be MIGHTY SMALL if everybody sent away MONEY that could be SPENT HERE. Buy goods MADE IN EDMONTON." Economics aside, we perhaps don't really understand this declaration until we read another of the books that are beginning to unroll from the presses to celebrate Alberta's (Saskat-

chewan's is quieter, so far) 75th anniversary: Tom Radford's splendid anthology of Rudy Wiebe's stories and Harry Savage's blue-filtered photographs, *Alberta A Celebration* (Hurtig). However mercantile the poster is, its character derives from its voice, its laconic passion for place. And this is precisely what Wiebe, at his anecdotal best here, tries to evoke: the "innumerable stories" that happen every day; stories of the land, from which the people derive their gritty strength; "liar-talk," "chinook stories," "bear stories," that mask the strangeness of the imagination with the colloquiality of the tale-telling voice; "quality stories," as one character puts it, "when there's nothing but the usual scenery sliding past" (compare *that* with Harlow's quest for the spirit of wilderness); stories that connect human lives with pleasure and the past ("to enjoy life is no crime") as well as with change and emptiness — because "there's still the land." And what the land represents is a certain constancy of human existence, human story.

"How to tell the Story" is the repeated subject in Dick Harrison's lively and interesting set of conference proceedings, *Crossing Frontiers* (University of Alberta), with contributions from Kroetsch, Mandel, and several others — the *process* of story-telling differing, several writers say, on opposite sides of the U.S./Canadian border. Harrison himself, in another set of proceedings — Merrill Lewis and L. L. Lee's *The Westering Experience in American Literature* (Western Washington Univ.) — differentiates the American literary pattern, of seeking through Western myths to find historical fact, from the Canadian, of going back for the myth in order to find the present. (In one of the best essays in the Lewis and Lee volume, incidentally, Kenneth Innis attributes to Pratt what American literature attributes to Parkman, the creative discovery of Brébeuf and the "heroic origins of the country" — Pratt, "by a radical act of imagination, reconciling the Jesuit's vision "for all of Canada.") The contrast between the *process* of telling a people's story and the *theme* of the stories the people tell could not be more clearly revealed than by comparing the Harrison volume with Richard Chadbourne and Hallvard Dahlie's *The New Land* (Wilfrid Laurier University). The latter book contains the papers from yet another conference; these are full of information, but expositions rather than enactments of narrative gesture. Still, it is artificial utterly to separate these two critical stances. We cannot perceive or articulate a subject except by some sort of process. And the process connects us with a tradition, possibly our own. As Henry Kreisel observes, in an autobiographical essay in the *Annals* of the 2nd Montreal Symposium of the German-Canadian Studies Association, taking on a language means taking on a world; struggling with a language is part of the individual process of coming to terms with the world; failing with a language is less important than trying it out; and for himself, "what mattered ultimately was the attempt, now and again, to break the silence."

Such "silence," symbolic and imaginative as much as substantive and rational, impedes the mind's eye as much as the ear. Unless the mind of the maker, the

dancer, the watcher, animates them, masks do not speak or see. Animated, they enact somehow some aspect of the hidden creator. Which brings me to two further books: *The Art of Norval Morriseau* (Methuen), with an uneven text by Lister Sinclair and Jack Pollock, and *Coast of Many Faces* (Douglas & McIntyre), photographs by Ulli Stelzer with a lucid text by Catherine Kerr. *Morriseau* transcends its text and becomes Norval Morriseau's own book simply by the boldness of his acrylic designs and the vividness of the colour reproductions of them. They are billed as shamanistic visions, but in this context the epithet strikes me as romantic faddishness. It is possible neither to praise nor to dismiss the paintings simply because they are Indian. They are not traditional, though they show a clear appreciation of traditional Indian linear design. They are not imbued somehow by Natural Sophistication with an inexplicable grace. They are not religious artifacts. They do, however, show an acute sense of self-awareness; repeated self-portraiture, side-by-side with the designs from nature, constitutes a means of expressing a *sense* of self; inextricable here from the acknowledgment of an Indian heritage is an acknowledgment of a Christian education and a phallic consciousness. The resulting designs as much question as celebrate individuality in the context of the organized culture they emerge from, and the boldness of execution is perhaps a more subtle gesture than hard-edged acrylic at first suggests.

Catherine Kerr happily draws her text for *Coast of Many Faces* from the words of the inhabitants of the fifty small West Coast communities she and Ulli Stelzer visited and recorded here — communities like Kincolith, Klemtu, Bella Bella, Kyuquot, Sointula, and Telegraph Cove. The inhabitants themselves are carvers, fallers, camp cooks, sawyers, skippers, churchmen, oolichan fishermen, paper mill workers, and pinball players; Stelzer's magnificent photographs catch their faces and the sheer pace of their lives, and Kerr has listened creatively for the phrases to match them. "This is a twenty-four hour town," says one person; "I get along good here." Another: "My mom used to get me up at dawn to see our people's fish boats going out. Looked like a city going out, with all the lights." And yet another: "What have we been doing for the last hundred years? We have been drifting away from our culture, our beautiful culture. Many times I have gone to Skedans and gone back in the hills and looked down on the village and considered what happened there hundreds of years ago. Was I born a hundred years too late? Now we see the mixing of two cultures. We Haidas have adapted both, and we live very comfortably here in the village of Skidegate." We are beyond oral history with words like these, and listening to voices with a story-teller's ear. We also find ourselves piercing the public images of a self-conscious world because the photographer's art has allowed us to see through them to the wilderness and other hidden faces.

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