

GEORGE WOODCOCK

Voyager of Liberty

Dennis Duffy

HOW DOES A CRITIC MAKE SENSE of another writer and critic who remains at once unsystematic and significant? Even stating that blazons forth the limitations of my own way of viewing the nature of intellectual consciousness. No, I am not reiterating the familiar romantic dichotomy between Apollo and Dionysus, nor even insinuating a denim-clad, oracular conviction that insight wins hands-down over outlook. What I am attempting to display appear to be the rigidities inherent in the entire academic enterprise of codification, taxonomy, and paradigmatic arrangement of ideas. For the reader privileged to wander through the extensive *oeuvre* of George Woodcock quickly senses a central concern with freedom, individuality and even eccentricity and waywardness that courses through that canon. This goes quite beyond a fascination with *bizarrierie*; it serves instead as the inevitable and glowing consequence of a figure who stands out not only as a libertarian in philosophy and outlook, but also as one in actual practice. His work, therefore, not only discusses libertarian thinkers and doers, but figures forth a libertarian sensibility, one capable of ranging over widely-disparate persons, places and things because that very ranging lies at the core of the man's beliefs.

A familiar instance of the sort of contradiction Woodcock escapes lies in the celebrated quip that Carlyle's life of Cromwell proclaims the virtues of silence in fourteen volumes. Doctrinaire invitations to a looser sex life, shrill polemics on the benefits of peace, programmed guidebooks to the odyssean lifestyle offer similar examples of contradictory discourse on our current bookshelves. Woodcock's choice of subjects — anarchism, Hellenism in India, literary figures, the native peoples of our west coast, to name a few — follows the lines of his interests. He has written some of the best travel literature of our time;¹ let this serve to illustrate his wider selection of subjects. His non-travel books are themselves products of intellectual pilgrimages, of an effort to penetrate to a region one may have only heard of, or visited once during a stopover. They may also — as in the superb biography of Gabriel Dumont, which fuses Woodcock's lifelong libertarian beliefs and practices with his more recent investigations of the Canadian fact — appear as the place one has been headed toward for a number of years. Person

and mind both have voyaged on strange seas, bringing back to us news from elsewhere, even that ultimately inaccessible elsewhere that is our past.

The reader used to systems must force himself to grasp the inner coherence that pulls together the achievement of George Woodcock, and not envision his non-systematic canon as a series of lengthy *aperçus*. His work is best perceived as lines radiating from a single dot on a map, linking a number of seemingly disparate locations into a network deriving its strength from its very flexibility, its tentacular virtue enabling it to grasp firmly the multifoliate detail that eludes rigid systems.

Literary folk recall the emblematic Jamesian figure (in the Introduction to James's own *The Ambassadors*) of a series of lamps arrayed in a circle, each successively illuminating the object in the centre. In Woodcock's case, simply rebuild the doughnut by turning it inside out: his sensibility serves as a lantern, illuminating the objects around the periphery, tying them together — like the candle held up to George Eliot's pier-glass — into a series of unsuspected relationships. Thus for example the unlettered Dumont, the ideologist Proudhon and the potlatching Indians of the West Coast reveal their unsuspected affinities in their common indifference to the mere accumulations of material objects. Many further instances of this integrative result of reading Woodcock could be listed. Their importance, in so brief a treatment of his work as the present one, lies in this: any reader of Woodcock will find his imagination, powers of sympathy and ability to grasp the other, strengthened in ways that no immersion into a system ever can.

What a benefit this has proven to Canada's intellectual life! Just as Margaret Laurence's African works teach us by their very presence that our own experience remains part of a larger continuum of human experience, so does Woodcock's achievement demonstrate that the most enthralling prospect a Canadian nationalist can provide is one that looks outward. The strength, for example, of *Canada and the Canadians* lies in its grasp of the larger histories and world movements that shape our own doings. Canadians, of course, do well to be wary of "internationalist" outlooks that do little more than bleach away our own cultural peculiarities and dilemmas in an effort to blend them more easily into a patchwork of cultural preoccupations that turns our own space into nowhere. "International" has so often degenerated into a synonym for "continental" or "imperial" (*outward-looking* becoming a rationalization for blanking out our own inwardness) that we can too easily forget the light that springs from beyond the easternmost shore and sets well beyond our own western one. Again, I recall the biography of Gabriel Dumont: its sure feel for the realities of non-technological, libertarian societies, whose mechanisms for social control emphasize the personal at the expense of the codified-legal, strengthens its treatment of the society its subject embodied in a way that no mastery of the conventional histories of the Canadian West could have. The historian of the Doukhobors supplied the tools

that granted a fineness of execution to the chronicles of the Metis. In a culture where high school students in Ontario are now presented with the history of Canada before acquiring any grasp of the European imperial struggles which our beaver and codfish industries, our Jesuits and our voyageurs, found their place in, the network of candles Woodcock has set about our borders becomes invaluable through its very rarity.

This outward-looking quality places Woodcock within the sort of cultural movement represented by such diverse works as Scott Symons's *Heritage* and Hugh Hood's *A New Athens*. Both works strive movingly to present to us the extent to which our own culture is not some parochial aberration functioning according to its own autonomous and disconnected drives, but a unique development of a Judaeo-Christian, Western, world-imperial structure, one of whose final waves crashed so deafeningly upon these shores. Symons and Hood call attention to the historical continuum from which we sprang. Woodcock places before us by juxtaposition and implication a continuum of affinities and interests marking the linkages between our own culture and those elsewhere. The implicit and subtle nature of the project makes it all the more worthy of praise in a culture swept by both parochialism and polemic.

Whatever the price paid for them in self-contempt and self-sacrifice, the old Imperial ties gave us that sense of belonging to a process global in its reach, cosmic in its moral importance, and universal in its strivings. The political and material underpinnings of that feeling have long since vanished. If there remains any hope for Canada's recovery of a sense of historic purpose, it lies now in the direction of Woodcock's rejection of politics (as described in his essay of 1944). That is, the Canadian people's surest pathway to a distinct selfhood lies in their attempts to build community within the dying husk of the Canadian national state. One need not agree with this vision of Woodcock's to grant its nobility and to discover that the wide-ranging nature of his cultural achievement offers a paradigm for creative and energizing dispersal from a centre.

THE FACT THAT THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD appears as a commonplace now rather than as the anguished revelation which Yeats brought us sixty years ago. In a time when all systems appear destroyed, when the West lurches from crisis to crisis, its rhetoric of urgency and despair inflating as rapidly as its currency, when the coinage of the marketplace and the currency of intellectual discourse suffer alike from Gresham's Law, has any thinker the right to abjure a system? Does not every man's duty require him to search for a unified structure of meaning and to preach it from the housetops to a world gripped by an energy crisis intellectual as well as material in nature? Does not Woodcock's

diversified portfolio represent the grandest efflorescence of bourgeois individualism rather than a model for collective investment of scarce resources?

The very term “libertarian” — rather than “anarchist,” it offers the best single word description of Woodcock’s bias — has taken on an edgy ambiguity. It has come to be almost a code-word for identifying the proponents of the individual’s divine right — under Capitalism — to exclude himself from every social obligation impeding the pursuit of profit. “Laissez-faire” having grown too laden with noisome connotations for employment in discourse designed to counsel the doubtful, “libertarian” conveys that convincing ring of righteousness. Liberty remains — in these days of pro-abortionists and health-food freaks — a stronger catchword than motherhood and apple pie.

Yet the misappropriation of a term ought not to kill its use among persons of goodwill, and liberty remains Woodcock’s abiding concern. Hence his fascination with the eccentric and the offbeat, from Aphra Behn to Henry Walter Bates, as well as his expert treatment of anarchist theorists and practitioners. Anarchism offers, after all, a more exacting and ennobling model of a free person’s behaviour than does the liberal model, in that — hence its resemblance to classical conservatism — it places the individual’s freedom within a rich communal context of obligation and responsibility that renders his choice more deliberate and exemplary. Of course, as Woodcock shows repeatedly in his work on the Doukhobors, conformity to peer pressure stands as the direct threat to anarchistic ideals of freedom. Yet, that danger faced, where else can one locate a polity in which people possess the opportunity for freedom’s most glorious exercise: a person’s free choosing of the laws he determines to live by?

Recall then Woodcock’s range of subjects. How many of them deal with those forgotten by history (and not offering, therefore, sure-fire prospects for popularity)! And within these various subjects, how level-headed and honest Woodcock remains in his evaluation, refraining from any emphasis on the sensational, standing back from the kind of search-and-destroy criticism that will attract an audience out for blood. Here is the possessor of sufficient sensibility, industry and imagination to have set himself up as the literary dictator of Anglophone Canada. Instead, he founds a journal that irritates every would-be-Torquemada of our national culture, and that attempts to include within its pages literary criticism speaking more passionately and expansively than the standard academic fare. This is why a reader of Woodcock *in extenso* comes to sense the presence of a spirit behind the text, and to note with gratitude the tact and understanding with which it engages with personalities as diverse as those of George Orwell and Thomas Merton. Another way of expressing this is to recall the many moments in Woodcock’s works when he notes his presence at some ordinarily off-limits-to-outsiders experience to which his subjects have welcomed him. The reader can easily pass this over, so common a circumstance does it become.

That, surely, tells us something about a linkage between text and experience, between book and life, arguing that an openness and chameleon-like capacity for empathy abides as the foundation of intellectual virtues of free enquiry and delicacy of comprehension that mark the books.

The refusal to systematize, therefore, endures as Woodcock's most engaging system of belief. It offers to a reader a liberating sense of a free spirit seeking no more than to understand — and by that very understanding establish the bed-rock for any meaningful improvement in — the life surrounding it.

Even to mention this, however, is to delineate a strength of Woodcock's writing that looms as an enemy to its survival. For he stands nakedly, an historicist and empiricist, within a culture whose strongest analysts remain paradoxically mythicists at their utmost core.

A little explanation is needed here. Surely everyone would agree that among the giants of our literary culture, so far as discursive, non-imaginative literature is concerned, stand such figures as George Grant, Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. Others could be added to this list (notably Donald Creighton), but the trinity I have selected will serve to make my point as I examine each in turn.

A finer pen than mine has discussed the mythological paradigm of temptation and fall that lies behind the best-known work of George Grant.² To note this figure's occurrence in Grant's work no more denigrates his work than it does that of the most fabular and metaphoric of philosophers, Plato. The fact remains that *Lament For A Nation* acquires its peculiar resonance through its sense of a more gracious, continuous and integrated Canada whose passing is symbolized in the defeat of John Diefenbaker. This mythic figure contains a garden (British North America), a tempter (the lure of modernity as embodied in the fashionably intelligent of Central Canada), and the hero from Prince Albert whose fall involved a heartbreak and repudiation greater in extent than the tragedy of one individual. Frequently in Grant's writing, the abstraction of "modernity" appears as a looming Spenserian monster, a dirigible-sized emblem enfolding within itself a host of philosophic questions and preoccupations.

Let me repeat that to note such presences is not to downplay the coherence and sincerity of the philosophic contexts in which they appear. For overriding the writings of Grant and of McLuhan as well stands a context including such literary titans as Ruskin and T. S. Eliot, with their vision of a sea-change having overtaken ourselves and the universe since that period we term the Renaissance.³ As pervasive remains our sense of ourselves and our predicament as unique; so widespread our reliance upon the trinitarian division (and Joachim of Flora gave us a capital-T version of that as well) of the world into ancient — medieval — modern, that we accept as a given the unique nature of the final phase. When an ultimately Christian (in origin) pattern of progress lands atop that division, a

period of cultural despair can then take that same process and reverse its moral import into a sequence of decline rather than of regeneration. The habit of thought remains the same, whether one finds Gutenberg or Milton as the principal representative of the split. Grant and McLuhan therefore offer to their readers not only a theory, a system granting some sort of patterning and explanation to the experience of a cruel century, but one resting ultimately upon the familiar mythic pattern of the fall. To the quality of their rational analysis is added the compelling satisfactions of sensuous, mythical discourse.

That Northrop Frye offers his readers a system proclaims but a commonplace, though even the many critics lambasting that system have not always noted its affinities with the tetragrammatic system of William Blake. Perhaps they have neglected to do so because the statement appears so obvious (my own readers will agree that here stands a barrier I have never balked at), but surely any reader can note a certain affinity between the powers assigned Blake's Four Zoas and the fourfold literary divisions thronging the pages of the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Detailed explication ought to be avoided here; suffice it to note that even readers failing to share what would appear to be Frye's profound satisfaction with consoling, fourfold symmetry can acknowledge the hold that successful displays of numerology have on most of us.

These are deeply Romantic intellectual leaders. They depict not a world bathed in the gentle glow of eighteenth-century Hellenism, but a dark forest illuminated by blinding shafts of interpretive insight, a wood rocking perpetually to the thunderous denunciations of criticism and controversy. Like Shakesperean wizards, clutching their staves of power — Grant's talismanic usage of "modernity," McLuhan's gaily oracular phrases, Frye's anatomy of literature with scriptures as backbone, Milton as head and Blake as guts — they offer to their readers a key to experience, a specific way of seeing as well as a progress of picturesque sights. They are not, any of them, ill-at-ease with the parabolic and the epigrammatic.

Placed against these roaring Wagnerian tempests, Woodcock's gentle, Mozartean strains fail to batter the reader's sensibility into perpetual remembrance. Yet, while I esteem highly the three thinkers I have mentioned, and grant them their niche in any Canadian pantheon, the fact remains that Woodcock — less memorable stylistically, without a single work of dazzling brilliance, often foregoing the devastating comment that would earn him the ringside audience — adds to our literary and cultural life a dimension we would sorely miss, however little we may acknowledge it. Yes, in reading Woodcock's sweet reasonableness about George Orwell I find myself longing for the sheer, engrossing bloody-mindedness its subject was able to bring to bear on nearly any subject he chose, yet where can be found a better book on Orwell as both writer and man? If Mordecai Richler gives the name of Woodcock to a gentle, reasonable idiot in one of his novels, the reader might rather more enjoy a smashing riposte than the humble admission of

human frailty Woodcock makes to the insult, yet hasn't our little, bristly republic of letters a sufficiency of street-brawlers?⁴

One of Woodcock's signal contributions to our literature, his widely-reprinted essay on MacLennan's novels,⁵ locates in them the pattern of the Odyssean adventure. Perhaps the piece is as autobiographical as critical, in that the figure of the home-seeking hero seems not all that remote from Woodcock's lifelong concern with the values of community and with the attempts of men and women over the ages to build a nobler and more decent world. The parallel need not be pushed to the point of absurdity for us to recognize the many strange and wondrous places that get touched upon in Woodcock's writings, from Evangelical hymns to the clipped elegance of the Hong Kong racecourse.⁶ For the reader taking that voyage, the ports of call never cease to intrigue, and the captain remains ever free.

NOTES

- ¹ See especially his *Incas and Other Men: Travels in the Andes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959) and *Faces of India* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964).
- ² R. D. MacDonald, "The Persuasiveness of Grant's Lament for a Nation," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 2 (Summer 1972), 245-46.
- ³ See my *Marshall McLuhan* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 20-21, 27.
- ⁴ "[A]nd if our name happens to be shared by one of those [monstrous, satiric] figures (as mine is) we ask ourselves whether there is more in common than a name." "Richler's Wheel of Exile," in Woodcock's *The Rejection of Politics and Other Essays* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. 144.
- ⁵ See "A Nation's Odyssey: the Novels of Hugh MacLennan" (1961), rpt. in *Odysseus Ever Returning* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), pp. 12-23.
- ⁶ *The British in the Far East* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969); "The English Hymn," in Woodcock's *The Writer and Politics* (London: Porcupine Press, 1948), pp. 207-26.

THE BRONZE DOORS AT PISA

Ralph Gustafson

Taller than two monks, the bronze doors at Pisa,
 In one oblong the angel of the Lord on Jesus' sepulchre
 Swinging his feet. Hammerwork
 Sophisticate with innocence
 More in love with heaven than chapels of rococo
 Florid with space.
 Lord, deliver us!
 Anonymity, simpleness and faith.