

E. K. BROWN (1905-1951)

The Critic and His Writings

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A CRITIC," E. K. BROWN WROTE, "is a sensitive reader who can explain his responses and evaluations."¹ In a critical career that lasted scarcely twenty-two years, he illustrated his own definition as he studied the literature of Canada, the United States, and Europe with exemplary discernment and intelligence.

Though Brown was not a theoretical critic, he did pause to define his method:

The criticism of poetry as of any art must first interpret. If in the exercise of his interpretative function a critic writes chiefly of what is genuine in a poem, what is notable, what is *there*, rather than of what is spurious, what is negligible, what is not there, his doing so need not mean that he is abandoning another of his functions, the making of judgments. Careful interpretation, conducted with insight and a measure of sympathy, must precede judgment, and in writing of recent or contemporary poets it is much wiser to make sure that one's interpretation is adequate than to press on to judgment. The history of criticism is strewn with examples of how the slighting of the critic's interpretative function has led to false and absurd judgments.²

Later he elaborated his own practice:

There is a third kind of study, to which I hope these lectures may belong. Isolating a single element or group of elements in the novel, and considering it in unreal separation from all the other elements with which it actually fuses, is artificial, but so is all criticism. The artificiality is justified if when one turns back from the criticism to the novels these appear more intelligible and more delightful. That is the test. You need a great many lamps, some of them very powerful, to find your way through the labyrinth of a great novel. I offer what is perhaps only a candle, and I hope it may not go out.³

For Brown literary criticism is interpretation and judgment, response and evaluation; criticism makes art "more intelligible and more delightful" to the reader.

Though I have outlined elsewhere Brown's life and education, it seems desirable to offer a brief account here.⁴ Edward Killoran Brown graduated from University College in the University of Toronto in 1926 with his bachelor's degree and the Governor-General's Medal in Modern Languages. On a Massey Fellow-

ship he travelled to the University of Paris where he received his *Diplôme d'études supérieures* in 1927, the *Elève titulaire de l'École de Hautes Etudes* in 1928, and the *Docteur-ès-Lettres* in 1935; he wrote his major thesis in French, "Edith Wharton, étude critique," and his minor thesis in English, "Studies in the Text of Matthew Arnold's Prose." He returned to University College in 1929 to become an Instructor in the Department of English; in 1931 he became an Assistant Professor. With the exception of two years, 1935-1937, which he spent at the University of Manitoba as the youngest chairman of an English department in Canada, he taught at University College until 1941, when he assumed the chairmanship of the English department at Cornell University. In the following year he took a six-months' leave of absence to serve on the wartime staff of Prime Minister Mackenzie King. In 1944 he left Cornell to become Professor of English at the University of Chicago, a position he held until his untimely death from cancer in 1951.

The thesis on Edith Wharton illustrates Brown's primary field of study, the novel, as well as his interest in American Literature. During his years on the staff of University College he was advocating the teaching of American literature in Canadian universities, and his article, "The Neglect of American Literature," chided his countrymen for their ignorance of the literature of their southern neighbour. The minor thesis on Arnold reflects Brown's interest in Victorian literature. He published two critical volumes on Arnold and wrote introductions for two volumes of his essays; he also edited a major anthology of Victorian verse.

Relinquishing none of his interest in his chosen fields of the novel and Victorian literature, Brown devoted much of his critical attention to the developing world of Canadian literature and the relatively unpopulated world of Canadian criticism. The year after he returned from Paris he accepted an appointment as Associate Editor of the *Canadian Forum*, a position he held for three years. His first published article appeared there, and in the thirties alone he contributed more than fifty articles and reviews to the *Canadian Forum*. At the same time he worked on behalf of the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, which first appeared in 1931. He served as its Associate Editor for a decade, from 1932 to 1941, and he was largely responsible for the creation of an annual survey of Canadian Letters which began there in 1936. For Brown, who wrote the first fifteen yearly assessments of Canadian poetry, the survey had a singular importance:

A recognition that in Canada we stand in need of a more effective criticism has led the editors of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* to publish an annual survey of Canadian literature. For three years now in *Letters in Canada*, to which we devote the greater part of our April issue, we have sought to supply a comprehensive survey of what is written in this country: in the course of time we hope that this undertaking may have a modest share in the diffusion of interest in Canadian literature, in the raising of aesthetic and intellectual standards in Can-

ada, and in the discovery of writers who might otherwise pass, for a time at least, neglected or misunderstood.⁵

To his study of Canadian literature Brown brought his knowledge of English, French, and American literatures. In one of his earliest essays, he accounted for the virtue of Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*: "Aside from their charming formal qualities, their urbanity, their lucidity, their sure but graceful structure, the collection is significant as a bridge thrown across the Channel. With it, Matthew Arnold opened to the island philistines new vistas of continental literature and culture."⁶ Like Arnold, Brown refused to isolate his country's literature. In his Canadian criticism he applied the same standards he used in his study of other literatures, and he placed Canadian literature in an international context. As Northrop Frye has commented,

E. K. Brown was the first critic to bring Canadian literature into its proper context. Before him, the main question asked was "Is there a Canadian literature?" After him, the question was rather "What is Canadian literature like?" He started out with an interest in contemporary literature which in his generation marked a quite unusual originality, and he worked at first mainly on American authors, including Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. Thus, when he came to Canadian literature, he was able to see it, not simply as a local product growing in the surrounding woods like a hepatica, but as a literary development within, first, its North American context, and, secondly, in its international context. He was aware of the British and colonial affinities of earlier Canadian literature, but did not exaggerate their importance as earlier critics had tended to do.⁷

In 1950 Brown delivered the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto. Called upon to thank the speaker for the series, E. J. Pratt paid tribute to a man he had known and respected for nearly thirty years:

He has shown a double capacity — of probing into the recesses of literary cupboards and of following current affairs. I know that he has visited museums but mainly to make sure that the mummies had left in life something worthy of record for the future. I know, too, that he has visited press galleries, but to make certain that what was said or written had, or should have had, a basis of growth in the past. The former type of interest and capacity brilliantly preserved his scholarship and his sanity; the latter saved him from dilettantism.

And as a concluding remark I should like to say that there was a perfect accord between his own taste and the selection of his subjects for this series ["Rhythm in the Novel"]. He has changed his postal address many times in his career. Here is the division of the last 27 years — 4 years as a student in this university, 3 years in Paris, back to the University of Toronto as a teacher for 6 years, 2 years in the University of Manitoba, 4 years again in Toronto, 3 in Cornell, then 6 in Chicago, and in-between-whiles he had the habit of interweaving, through those itineraries, summer visits at wayside inns such as Columbia, and the Universities of New York and Minnesota. Now he is back this week in Toronto. That diversity of place and interest, that progression, (shall we say in the flesh?) accompanied by an intel-

lectual pilgrimage which brought him as far as India, proceeded with a rhythm of repetition and variation, seen less in life than in fiction. And perhaps the best way I can express this appreciation of his lectures is to say that amongst all of his concrete and picturesque examples with which he has reinforced his theme, the finest illustration of the expanding symbol is himself.⁸

In June 1951, the Royal Society of Canada presented posthumously the Lorne Pierce Medal in Canadian Letters to Edward Killoran Brown. In his citation A. S. P. Woodhouse spoke with sympathetic objectivity of his friend and former colleague at University College:

Such, in brief, was the career of a Canadian who won for himself a secure place in the international world of literary scholarship, with his books on Edith Wharton and Matthew Arnold, his admirable introductions to Arnold's prose and to Victorian verse, and his various articles and reviews: to which we must add his most mature critical work, *Rhythm in the Novel*, published just before his death, and the almost completed official life of Willa Cather, shortly to be published by Knopf. It is proper that these works should take precedence in setting forth his claim to the Lorne Pierce medal: first, because it was his own principle that Canadian writing must submit to an international, and not to a merely local, judgment, and that it must rise to an international standard of interest and of excellence; and, secondly, because it was in these wider fields of study that he secured the training, the insight and the perspective which gave his writing on Canadian literature its peculiar value and authority. That writing is perhaps the most impressive achievement of its kind yet to appear. Besides his edition of Lampman, it includes his memoir (now in the press) of Duncan Campbell Scott (whom he knew and admired, and who may perhaps be reckoned the last of the moulding influences upon his mind), secondly, his book *On Canadian Poetry*, with its definitive chapter on the conditions of authorship in Canada, its account of the development of Canadian poetry (the most illuminating yet written), and its critical estimate of three major figures; and, finally, the fifteen annual surveys which furnish by far the best account available of poetry in Canada during the past decade and a half. Such scholarship and criticism are of incalculable value to Canadian letters, in themselves, and as an example.

Mr. President, this is the achievement of but half a life-time. But it is enough.⁹

The bibliography of E. K. Brown's critical writings attests to the breadth of his knowledge, the rigour of his critical standards, and the sensitivity of his responses and evaluations. In compiling the bibliography, I have not included second editions, revisions, or reprints unless they have substantial changes. For each "Causerie," a short, informal piece of criticism Brown contributed to the *Winnipeg Free Press* on an irregular basis for nearly four years, I have appended in brackets a brief description of its content; an asterisk after the description []* indicates that the causerie was printed in the collection, *Causeries*, published by the *Winnipeg Free Press*.¹⁰ The following abbreviations are used: *AL*: *American Literature*; *CanB*: *Canadian Bookman*; *CanF*: *Canadian Forum*; *CE*: *College English*; *DalR*: *Dalhousie Review*; *MLN*: *Modern Language Notes*; *MP*: *Modern*

Philology; *QQ*: *Queen's Quarterly*; *SatN*: *Saturday Night*; *SatRL*: *Saturday Review of Literature*; *SR*: *Sewanee Review*; *UTQ*: *University of Toronto Quarterly*; *VaQR*: *Virginia Quarterly Review*; *WFP*: *Winnipeg Free Press*; *YaleR*: *Yale Review*.

NOTES

- ¹ "Causerie," *WFP* (Jan. 13, 1951), 17. Rpt. in E. K. Brown, *Responses and Evaluations: Essays on Canada*, ed. and with an intro. by David Staines (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), 313.
- ² "Letters in Canada: Poetry," *UTQ*, 18 (April 1949), 255. Rpt. in *Responses and Evaluations*, 274.
- ³ *Rhythm in the Novel* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1950), 7.
- ⁴ *Responses and Evaluations*, vii-xvi. See also Leon Edel's Foreword to E. K. Brown, *Willia Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1953), xvii-xxiv.
- ⁵ "The Contemporary Situation in Canadian Literature," *Canadian Literature Today* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1938), 16.
- ⁶ "The Critic as Xenophobe," *SR*, 38 (July-September 1930), 301.
- ⁷ *Responses and Evaluations*, xiii-xiv.
- ⁸ Pratt Manuscripts, Box 9, number 71, Victoria College Library, Univ. of Toronto.
- ⁹ From the estate of Mrs. E. K. Brown.
- ¹⁰ *Causeries*, Winnipeg Free Press Pamphlet No. 35 (June 1951), consists of twenty causeries out of a total of, according to the Introduction, thirty-eight that Brown wrote. My research, however, reveals that Brown wrote forty-eight causeries. He once remarked to a friend that, had he not been so completely educated, he would have been strongly attracted to journalism.

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