

THE ENJOYMENT OF OVERREACHING

THIS ISSUE FOCUSES on children's literature in Canada, on the joys and the pressures of creating it, and on some of the problems associated both with writing for children and with finding the books that have been written with children in mind. Some of these problems have to do with language. Dianne Woodman mentions, for example, the difficulty of locating French-language children's books in Western Canada, which is vexing for booksellers and bookbuyers alike. Neither group wants to order books sight unseen. Yet both want access to the best of children's literature, for both have an investment in children — hence in the future — and therefore in the prospect of their children's facility in Canada's two official languages. Regional truths deeply and variously affect people's daily lives. But part of every Canadian child's national, federal birthright is that of access to both English and French. Deliberately to deny such access comes close to being an immoral act. One understands it, perhaps, if it derives from ignorance or fear. But far more difficult to contend with are the accidental denials, the oversights or the preconceptions that prevent information from being readily circulated. If local booksellers cannot rely on publishers in both languages giving them adequate information to order stock wisely, then it would be a useful effort for publishers collectively, or publishers in collaboration with the Secretary of State, to set up regional or provincial information centres. By this I do not suggest setting up propaganda houses. But booksellers — and the general public — need access to permanent available displays of whatever works are in print, so that they can choose wisely for their own community: their customers, their family, and themselves.

Denying access to either language may result for any number of reasons. But like any repeated practice, it gives the impression to readers or listeners that the subject doesn't matter. A society that tolerates illiteracies in national television and radio daily news broadcasts should not wonder idly why a younger genera-

tion does not see the need to master grammar. And a society that effectively says to its children that they don't need to learn English or French should not wonder at a pervasive linguistic intolerance or a studied lack of enthusiasm. Such attitudes are not natural. But they result from the force of a daily education, and they run totally counter to the notion of egalitarian opportunity we loudly espouse, and to the actuality of mobility which is — or ought to be — part of every modern child's expectations.

There do exist various aids for enquiring adults and inquisitive children. There are bibliographies, and reference libraries, and critical periodicals like *Canadian Children's Literature*. There are some splendid children's magazines, including *Owl* (flamboyantly investigative about nature), *Canadian Children's Magazine* (inventive in its use of games, and intelligently conceived), and in many ways best of all, *Vidéo-Pressé* from Montreal. Profusely illustrated in colour, and captivating for children who read, *Vidéo-Pressé* contains cartoons, games, quizzes, narratives, and scientific documentaries; it takes children's actual lives seriously, and shows what with imagination and effort children can do; it focusses each issue on a special topic, and over a year's subscription supplies children with a kind of mini-encyclopedia on a whole subject; and it amply demonstrates how education can go hand-in-hand with entertainment. No library should be without such journals; no child should be denied access to them.

Librarians, teachers, parents, and other powers-that-be, unfortunately, often hesitate before exposing children to a challenge which — like long words, complex sentences, and a second language — they themselves perceive as difficult. But as is the case so many times, the problem is less the children's than their own. Many educators and officials designing new school curricula, for example, try to resolve the problems which they encountered in school rather than to take account of whatever problems teachers and students are currently facing. Similarly, unthinking institutions often — often even in the name of *standards* — perpetuate misconceptions about literature and learning. And they do so without taking account of the average (or the extraordinary) contemporary child's life. Television, for one thing — which is a visual medium all right, but intensely *verbal* as well — has increased many a child's ability to read early. A lot of the messages are repetitive, but they are also linguistically quite sophisticated. To tell a child that the message flashed on the screen "doesn't mean anything" is implicitly to say that reading doesn't matter. To dismiss, either directly or tacitly, a child's growing capacities for reason — for mental activity — is to say that schooling doesn't matter. And to insist that children's reading ought to follow culturally archaic or semantically deprived models that have nothing to do with their own experience and observation of speech and the world is to engender a distaste for all language: for books, for reading, and for the worlds of words. If language doesn't mean, if it isn't to be taken seriously, if it conveys only the

banal and the factitious, and if it doesn't provide enjoyment, why learn it? Or put another way, why teach language — however formally or informally — in such a way that negative attitudes towards language come into being at all?

Bruno Bettelheim, writing in a recent issue of *Harper's* magazine, takes up many of these issues. "If the child," he writes, "is to realize his potential to talk — and his potential to read — the necessary skills must be encouraged. . . . Only if the words he learns enrich his life and increase the pleasure he receives from talking will he wish to keep adding new ones to his vocabulary. . . . If the parent shares his enjoyment in overreaching himself in this manner, the word soon becomes a permanent addition to the child's vocabulary. The child begins by trying to participate in what he views as his parent's magical ability to use complex language; in his efforts to make this 'magic' his own he . . . develops the ability to comprehend more complex thought processes. . . ."

"Without an earlier commitment to language through such positive experiences" — and the important point here is that the sharing of enthusiasm for language is a large social phenomenon and not solely a family possibility — "words will remain for the child just that: abstract, and devoid of personal meaning, useful for communication, perhaps, but essentially unattractive."

Bettelheim goes on at some length to chastise the makers of textbooks for not taking vocabulary, syntax, or children's social roles seriously, for unpardonably underestimating children's abilities and children's capacities, and for reinforcing negative cultural attitudes towards the power of intellect. He makes a good point. And there is a profound sense in which the imagination, just as much as the intellect, has to be free to try to overreach. But then he goes on to reveal a bias of his own, to curtail educational possibilities, and to define the limits of enjoyment in an unjust way: "Learning to read is serious business for the child, and . . . the pleasure that can be gained from reading is a serious pleasure, not a vacuous one. There is no reason why our basal readers could not confer dignity on learning to read. . . . For it is this pleasure, and not the delights of teasing, or joking, or jumping wildly, that is the pleasure inherent in literacy." I have no quarrel with the serious intellectual pleasure of reading, nor with the dignity of learning to read. But one of the great enjoyments of reading is that it also allows us some moments of freedom from the seriousness in our lives. To be unable to enjoy fantasy, to be unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality, to be unable to see the relevance of fantasy to reality: these are the characteristics of the person who is unable to laugh. And the person without enough sense of his language to enjoy its jokes, its jumps, and its ways of voicing life's incongruities is a solemn pedant and a social autocrat. Bettelheim must know better. Any society that values intellectual growth in its children and intellectual flexibility in its adults has to know better. And that society must remember also how to encourage the growth and the flexibility: by providing access to language, by taking delight in

intellectual and imaginative overreaching, by expressing pleasure when art and life give pleasure, and by relaxing in laughter against the autocrats for whom order is unchanging and rigidity is king.

W.H.N.

AGAINST THE WISH OF BOROMEIO

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

In the Roman dusk,
against the wish of Boromeio,
the wind rose like a lonely idea.

Merisi, pale
from years of blanc d'Espagne,
took the thought with usual violence:
the solar fist
reducing ancient rules
to shape and colours,
according to El Greco's old testament.

The wind rose not like a dogma
but like a strong faith
and the cardinal mumbled to the painter:
"Someone should mould,
away from usual doctrines,
a theory of icons
aching with solitude
like Anthony in his empty land."

Against the wish of Boromeio
Merisi spoke of the true,
the real and the living.

In the isolated mind
the Greek diminuendo,
the mannerism in decay
and the art of imitation
all sank below the will of fresh anatomies.