SURVIVING THE PARAPHRASE

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IT IS A TESTIMONY to the limitations of Canadian literary criticism that thematic criticism should have become the dominant approach to English-Canadian literature. In its brief lifetime, Canadian criticism has acquired a history of being reluctant to focus on the literary work — to deal with matters of form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as these arise from the work as a unique construct. It has seldom had enough confidence in the work of Canadian writers to do what the criticism of other national literatures has done: explain and illuminate the work on its own terms, without recourse to any cultural rationalizations or apologies. Even the New Criticism's espousal of autotelic analysis did not move Canadian critics in this direction. Instead, in every period they have provided referential criticism: the evaluative criticism of Brown and Smith looks away from Canadian writing toward other national achievements; the anti-evaluative thematic criticism of Frye, Jones, Atwood, and Moss looks away toward alleged cultural influences and determiners.

With few critics interested in writing as writing, it is not surprising that Canada has in recent years seen the emergence of a large number of writer-critics. For unlike much earlier Canadian work, the recent writing has been engaged for the most part at the level of form and language rather than theme. Rudy Wiebe's journey from *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to *The Temptations of Big Bear* has been an odyssey in novelistic technique about which thematic criticism can say very little. bp Nichol's *Two Novels* speaks only through its formal complexities, and until these are illuminated the thematic critic has to remain silent — as he has. At the moment it is Canadian writers who appear to have the greatest understanding of the technical concerns and accomplishments of their fellows, and it is these — Mandel, Waddington, Geddes, Barbour, Scobie, Bowering, Livesay — who are writing most of the periodical criticism that in any way comes to terms with the writing. Many of the academic critics (and I include here Douglas Jones and Margaret Atwood because of their acceptance of the thematic approach) appear almost as ignorant of movements in contemporary Canadian writing as their colleagues in the 1920's were the formal experiments of Eliot, Pound, and Joyce.

Most of the weaknesses of thematic criticism stem from its origin in Arnoldian humanism, a tradition in which both the critic and the artist have a major responsibility to culture. In this view, the artist speaks, unconsciously or consciously, for the group. Says Jones, "[artists] participate in and help to articulate . . . a supreme fiction . . . that embodies the dreams and nightmares of a people, shapes their imaginative vision of the world, and defines, as it evolves, their cultural identity".[1] Language here is a tool employed not for its own intrinsic qualities but for the expression of ideas and visions. The critic's role is not to attend to language, form, or even to individual works of literature but to something called by Jones in *Butterfly on Rock* "our imaginative life", by Moss in his *Patterns of Isolation* the "national being",[2] and by Frye in *The Bush Garden* "cultural history".[3]

At best these assumptions are extra-literary; at worst, anti-literary. The focus of such criticism invariably rests outside the writing — on "literature", "culture", geography, history, and ideas. Books which begin ostensibly as attempts to illuminate separate instances of Canadian writing become messianic attempts to define a national identity or psychosis. The critical process produced by these assumptions is reductive. A novel is reduced to its declared themes and its plot outline; a poem to its declared themes; the Canadian culture ultimately to catch-words such as Atwood's "victimization" and "survival". Critical analysis is performed mostly to derive new catch-words and formulae.

The movement here is towards paraphrase — paraphrase of the culture and paraphrase of the literature. The critic extracts for his deliberations the paraphrasable content and throws away the form. He attends to the explicit meaning of the work and neglects whatever content is implicit in its structure, language, or imagery. Thus Atwood discusses the overt attacks on puritanism in Marian Engel's *The Honeymoon Festival*, but makes no comment about the novel's two most arresting technical features: its low-key style (common to all of Engel's fiction) and its unlikely, perhaps incredible, conclusion. Douglas Jones quotes lengthy passages from F. R. Scott and Patrick Anderson in order to integrate into his thesis their explicit statements on Canadian culture, but has no comment about their direct and largely denotative use of language. My objection here is based on a principle formulated by Frye: "the literary structure is always ironic because 'what it says' is always different from 'what it means'."[4] Thematic critics in Canada have been interested in what literary works "say", especially what they "say" about Canada and Canadians. They have largely overlooked what literary works "mean" — for the attempt to establish meaning would take them outside thematic criticism. As Robert Creeley has remarked,

> . . . it cannot be simply what a man proposes to talk about in a poem that is interesting — this is like going to hear an after-dinner speaker. His information will be interesting just to the extent that it exists, but after that we are through with him

> and through with the information in the form that he has given it to us. But the poem has this informational character . . . in such form that we don't throw away the poem. In other words, after we've read a play by Shakespeare, let's say, we don't throw away the play. We continue to define what is said/happening in how it is said.[5]

SINCE FRYE'S GENUINELY THEMATIC CRITICISM of Canadian literature constitutes a small body of work (less than half of *The Bush Garden*), since Moss's criticism is largely derivative of Frye and Jones, and since my opinion of Atwood's *Survival* is on record elsewhere,[6] I will restrict my detailed comments about thematic criticism here to Douglas Jones' *Butterfly on Rock*. One of the first characteristics of thematic criticism that one notices in this book is the humanistic bias. To Jones, culture is a gentleman's club inside which any member can speak piously on behalf of the rest of the group.

> . . . our westward expansion is complete, and in the pause to reflect upon ourselves we become increasingly aware that our identity and our view of the world are no longer determined by our experience of Europe. . . .

Apparently no one is allowed by Jones to detach himself from this rather arrogant humanistic assumption of corporateness of society. The assumption leads to further difficulties when extended to writing; the literary work comes to have little significance outside the body of the national literature. It can be valued not for its unique or idiosyncratic qualities but only for what it shares with the larger body. This means, in effect, that the derivative and the mundane can receive the critic's attention while the unusual or original do not. The eccentric Robertson Davies, for instance, does not get even a mention in Jones. Such a situation parallels the effect of humanism on society and culture where whatever coincides with mass-values is tolerated and whatever conflicts is rejected or ignored.

A second feature of thematic criticism evident in Jones is a disregard for literary history. Atwood develops her thesis that victimization is a characteristic theme of Canadian literature by ignoring its ubiquity in contemporary world literature. Moss develops his thesis that isolation is the major theme of Canadian fiction by overlooking, as George Woodcock has noted,[7] the fact that in all literatures the traditional subject of the novel has been the person who is "isolated" by his not being able to fit comfortably into society. Similarly, Jones tries to advance on the basis of work by the Confederation Poets the thesis that the Canadian landscape has been seen as "a savage place . . . holy and enchanted" — ignoring the documented fact that the ghostly presences in Carman, Lampman, and Roberts were inherited from English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism rather than gained osmotically from the Canadian condition. In each case the critic is forced into ignoring literary history by a paradox unique

to his critical approach. Thematic criticism in Canada seeks above all to define a national culture but chooses to work with materials — literary themes — that are, because of their limited number, international in nature. The paradox creates a dilemma from which there appears to be no scholarly escape.

A third feature is thematic criticism's tendency toward sociology — usually bad sociology. While the social scientist is content to describe society and predict the effects of specific events or interventions, Jones attempts both to describe Canadian culture and to prescribe how it should change. His sociology is not only extra-literary, it is normative and polemic. His declared aim is to locate a culture "in which the Canadian will feel at home in his world" and abandon his "colonial mentality".

> The weakness of the colonial mentality is that it regards as a threat what it should regard as its salvation; it walls out or exploits what it should welcome and cultivate.

This unscholarly approach leads Jones eventually to cast himself as a Canadian Adam who can announce to Canadians the end of exile and the discovery of "the first days of Creation".

A fourth feature is an attempt at "culture-fixing" — something very common of late in Canada in such books as Purdy's *The New Romans*, Kilbourn's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Redekop's *The Star-Spangled Beaver*, Frye's *The Bush Garden*, Fulford, Godfrey, and Rotstein's *Read Canadian*, and Atwood's *Survival*. To Jones, Canadian culture is in transition from an Old Testament condition of exile and alienation toward a New Testament one of affirmation, discovery, and community. This metaphor for the Canadian experience dominates *Butterfly on Rock* and becomes, much like Atwood's victim/victimization concept, a formula for Canadianism. Like all formulae, it is a restricting and potentially paralyzing thing. It restricts the writers which Jones can discuss; they are necessarily selected by their suitability to the thesis rather than by the quality of their writing. It is potentially paralyzing in the way that any attempt to define the Canadian subject must be — it serves to intimidate future Canadian writing into taking as its own the particular concerns that have been declared officially Canadian.

A fifth feature which Jones has in common with other thematic critics is the fallacy of literary determinism. The artist "embodies the dreams and nightmares of a people"; his work can be "explained" by reference to the geography and climate of the country, to western intellectual history, to his culture's religious heritage. Jones is much less guilty of this fallacy than is Frye in *The Bush Garden* with his reference to the "bleak northern sky" and to the St. Lawrence River's swallowing of travellers into "an alien continent", but he nevertheless fails to make clear that the writer is in some small way free, that the writer chooses among influences and traditions rather than being passively formed by them,

and that this process of election is more important to an understanding of literature than the influence or tradition itself. As Gaston Bachelard has observed, to "explain" a work by its sources is tantamount to explaining "the flower by the fertilizer".[8] But of course thematic criticism is not principally interested in the artistic progress, in the artist, or in the literary work — its interest lies, as Jones states, in things "cultural and psychological rather than purely aesthetic or literary".

THE MOTIVATIONS OF thematic criticism strike one as essentially defensive in respect to both the culture and the literature. A declared motive has been to avoid evaluative criticism, which Frye has claimed would reduce Canadian criticism to a "huge debunking project". An even more important but undeclared motive appears to have been to avoid treating Canadian writing as serious literature. For there are many kinds of non-evaluative criticism which these critics could have practised other than the thematic. It seems that the thematicists believe Canadian literature incapable of sustaining analytic, phenomenological, or archetypal inquiry — of sustaining any kind of criticism whose existence is not also supported by the ruse of sociological research. Another declared motive has been to articulate a cultural identity to a nation which the thematic critic believes convinced of its lack of one. It is noteworthy here that the thematicists' concerns — Jones' quest for "the obscure features of our own identity", Moss's for "a coherent body of Canadian fiction", Atwood's for "a single unifying and informing [Canadian] symbol"[9] are not those of critics of more mature and secure literatures. One cannot imagine a British critic being worried about what constitutes, in one word or less, the essence of his literature. Instead, he goes about its illumination, writing books with such titles as *New Bearings in English Poetry*, *A Key to Modern English Poetry*, *Four Metaphysical Poets*, *The English Novel*. Much more effective than *Butterfly on Rock*, *The Bush Garden*, *Survival*, and *Patterns of Isolation* in asserting a Canadian identity would have been books of this British type — books which assumed, rather than argued, a national identity's existence and a national literature's significance.

It is extremely important that Canadian critics not forget that there are indeed alternatives to thematic criticism, and that most of these do not involve a return to that *bête noire* evaluation. Further, these alternatives, like thematic criticism, do allow the writing of overviews of all or parts of Canadian literature. But unlike thematic criticism, they attend specifically to that ground from which all writing communicates and all themes spring: the form — style, structure, vocabulary, literary form, syntax — of the writing. One such alternative, historical criticism, could provide a history of Canadian poetry — a history not of its themes and concerns but of its technical assumptions, the sources of these assumptions, and

the relationship between the prosody of Canadian writers and that of other Western writers. While the prosody of Canadian poets has undoubtedly been mostly derivative, there have been shifts in the ingenuousness of the borrowing, in the time-lapse between the model and its imitation, in the sources of the models, and in the amount and significance of the modifications contributed by the borrower. All writing is to some extent derivative, but there would appear to be a clear division in Canadian poetry between obsequious borrowing — for example, that of Mair or Roberts — and the intelligent combining and expansion of borrowed forms. Needless to say, one by-product of such a non-thematic study would be an implicit statement about Canadians, Canada, and its evolution.

Analytical criticism could yield such works as "Modernism in Canadian Poetry" or "Discontinuous Structure in Post-modern Canadian writing". The former would not only address itself to the late appearance of the modernist movement in Canada — some thirty years after its appearance in Hispano-American literature and fifteen years after its appearance in Anglo-American literature — but inquire into the formal characteristics which distinguish Canadian modernism from its sister movements. Hispano-American modernism was anti-colonial in spirit; its rejection of European models in favour of native forms led artists eventually to primitivism, Anglo-American modernism was anti-Georgian and, from an American point of view, also anti-colonial. Canadian modernism, in the work of Smith, Scott, Gustafson, and Finch, copied the Anglo-Americans in both theory and practice; it proposed, unlike the South Americans, "cosmopolitan" models rather than regional ones, and to this extent seems to have been a colonial movement. My point here is that a colonial, imitative modernist movement is not to be deplored or rationalized into something other. It is itself an intrinsically interesting literary phenomenon, and in an absolute sense worthy of analysis and study; such a study can be done in terms of Canadian literature as successfully as it can in terms of any other.[10]

The second analytical project, "Discontinuous Structure in Post-modern Canadian Writing", could directly attempt on the basis of Canadian literature an elucidation of the problems and advantages of discontinuous literary structure. Such structure has been at the core of most significant new writing in Canada in the last decade: Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China*, David McFadden's *The Great Canadian Sonnet*, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Gerry Gilbert's *AND*, bp Nichol's The *Martyrology*, Juan Butler's *The Garbageman*, to name a few. While it would be absurd to argue that Canada has had any kind of monopoly or "lead" in such writing, the opportunity nevertheless exists for a literary problem important to all literatures to be usefully discussed strictly in terms of Canadian writing. The literature would provide the critic with a rich stock of relevant writing and a compact, clearly defined area for investigation.

Were genre criticism to attempt a work such as "The Polemic Novel in Canadian Literature", the same procedure would be involved; that is, of discussing on the basis of Canadian writing a literary issue of paranational interest. Here I am not asking for a repetition of thematic criticism's numerous discussions of the ideas of these novels, but for an examination of them as examples of a literary form — for an examination of their language, usual methods of characterization, narrative techniques, etc. The polemic novel exists throughout Canadian literature in abundance, with Kirby's *Chien d'Or*, several of Connor's works, Duncan's *The Imperialist*, Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*, McLennan's *Two Solitudes*, Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Atwood's *Surfacing*, Clarke's *Storm of Fortune*, and Richler's *The Incomparable Atuk* being among the stronger. Having had such an unusually large hold on Canadian fiction, it could, like derivative modernism or discontinuous form, be studied as thoroughly through Canadian literature as through any other body of national work. Such a claim does not imply that these Canadian novels are "great" novels; only that they form a more than adequate basis for serious literary study and deserve to be so treated.

Phenomenological criticism is another alternative non-evaluative approach which could do much to replace the present sociological perspective that dominates Canadian criticism with a literary one. Again, the essential assumption would be that Canadian literature is a highly useful frame of reference for approaching particular literary problems. One title which the phenomenologist could — and here no derogation would be intended by the word "colonial" — produce is "The Colonial Writing Experience". From Mair and Heavysege to Smith and Richler our writers have given literary form to the experience of living and writing in terms of values imposed by non-native cultures. The phenomenological critic could study how this experience is projected by the form of the writing, could participate in the consciousness of the artist as it is betrayed by his syntax, imagery, and diction; ultimately the critic could give the reader a portrait of each writer's psychological world. Another possible project for this kind of criticism is "The Regional Consciousness in Canadian Writing". In regional literature too, Canada has a more than sufficient body of work for the study of a particular, intrinsically interesting literary phenomenon. In fact, it is not unfair to say that the bulk of Canadian literature is regional before it is national — despite whatever claims Ontario or Toronto writers may make to represent a national vision. The regional consciousness may be characterized by specific attitudes to language and form, by specific kinds of imagery, or by language and imagery that in some way correlate with the geographic features of the region. The analyses in Atwood's *Survival*, for example, despite the book's ignoring of regional factors, imply a possible prepossession with closed space in Southern

Ontario writing and with the closing of space in Prairie writing. These leads call for further investigation.

A final type of criticism which might profitably be practised by Canadian critics is archetypal criticism which, despite the eminence of Northrop Frye, has never been applied in its pure form to Canadian writing. Frye's "theory of modes" would supply an especially interesting approach to a literature which has seen in recent years a curiously large number of attempts at high-mimetic art — including Newlove's "The Pride", Gutteridge's *Riel*, Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Nichol's *The Martyrology*, MacEwen's *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, and Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Possibly Frye's theory of an evolution from high mimesis to low mimesis to irony does not fit Canadian literature; perhaps in literatures which lack a native high-mimetic inheritance writers are stimulated to attempt such writing despite living in ages in which international writing is overwhelmingly low-mimetic or ironic. Only an archetypal examination of the language and structures used in Canadian and other recently-developed literatures could confirm such hypotheses.

Unless these or similar critical alternatives are taken up, there is a danger that the shape of the literature could suffer long-term distortion. Thematic criticism does not use, or need to use, literary criteria in selecting writers to document its arguments. It selects writers not in terms of literary competence or talent but in terms of how well their work fits the critic's particular thematic thesis. While one may agree with Frye that evaluation is the "incidental by-product" of criticism rather than its end, one finds that the by-product of thematic criticism is to create the illusion that palpably inferior writers are somehow more important — at least to loyal Canadians — than obviously superior ones. Thus Atwood makes Dennis Lee appear more significant than Irving Layton and Graeme Gibson more significant than Margaret Laurence; Jones makes Patrick Anderson and Phyllis Webb appear more significant than Dorothy Livesay; Moss makes Charles Bruce and Thomas H. Raddall appear more accomplished than Robert Kroetsch, Hugh Hood, or Robertson Davies. The only criticism which can yield the kind of critical by-products which Frye has in mind is one which focuses not on sociological issues but on the writing itself. Here no writer can be excluded because of his attitudes or subject matter. All competent uses of literary form can enter into the deliberations of the historical, analytic, genre, phenomenological, or archetypal critic. The more profound uses rise to prominence because of their power, complexity, and ingenuity. Thematic criticism searches for apples among oranges by looking for cultural seers among men and women whose principal task is articulation and whose principal loyalty is to their language; these alternative kinds of criticism would turn the critic's attention back to where the writer's must always be — on literature as language, and on writing as writing.

NOTES

[1] *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 4.
[2] (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 7.
[3] (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971), p. 215.
[4] *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 81.
[5] Tape-recorded lecture at home of Warren Tallman, Vancouver, B.C., August 29, 1962.
[6] "Atwood Walking Backwards," *Open Letter* (second series) 5 (Summer 1973), 74-84.
[7] "Isolating a Theme in our Fiction," *Maclean's*, April 1974, p. 96.
[8] *The Poetics of Space*, tr. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. xxvi.
[9] *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972), p. 31.
[10] For another example of the analytical approach to colonial writing see William D. Gairdner's article, "Traill and Moodie: the Two Realities," *The Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I:2 (Spring 1972).

EVEN WISDOM

John Newlove

He is the nervous hunter.
Words, women, whisky, even wisdom,
are his game; he admits
to no favourite order.

He follows any road,
looking at everything.
No tree escapes his inspection,
and horses are not safe either.

This week his baldness
assaults the radio; next,
his wine rusts an island, a junta
feels the weight of his cigar.

Back and forth he wanders,
asking questions. He ought to have
a greasy grey felt hat
pushed back on his head. Perhaps he has.

I can see those shoes of his
plumb in the middle of a forest;
that hand grabbing a beer
at the north pole; that wet cigar
shining, just like a bloody star.