NOVEL AND ROMANCE

T. D. MacLulich

RECENT THEMATIC STUDIES have brought a considerable degree of order into discussions of the main intellectual concerns of Canadian literature. In particular, the thematic critics have specialized in unearthing the hidden patterns of fiction — a form which appears to yield more readily to their analysis than does poetry. But the more traditional picture of Canadian fiction, obtained by defining the chronological stages in its development and isolating the formal literary "kinds" of writing, has not advanced significantly beyond the state reached in those two monuments to critical orthodoxy, Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada* and the collectively authored *Literary History of Canada.*

These books propose a simple hypothesis about the development of fiction in Canada: the movement they project is basically a straight-line progression away from romantic and unrealistic treatment and towards a realistic, socially committed fiction. In presenting their argument, the authors make the traditional identification of the mainstream of Canadian fiction with the realistic novels of Grove, Callaghan, MacLennan, and Davies. But this analysis may be misleading. When all the works which fall outside the central tradition are grouped together — the isolated anomalies like Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* and Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, as well as the best of the many works usually described in a somewhat dismissive manner as "regional" — the mavericks seem, in fact, to outnumber the mainstream.

The theory of a development towards realism has gained wide credence largely because critics have started with a built-in bias in its favour; they have felt, on what appear to be fundamentally moral grounds, that a progression towards realism *ought* to have taken place. The writer should face up to his social obligations; fiction should depict the actual world, not some escapist fantasy-land: these have been tacit critical axioms. Therefore, critics have equated realistic with "serious" fiction and non-realistic with less serious, more "popular" fiction. Realism and non-realism have been turned into value-judgments rather than simply being used as descriptive categories.

It was Pacey's work which gave canonical form to the idea of a movement towards realism. His division of fiction into historical romance, regional idyll, and realistic novel has haunted Canadian criticism ever since the first publication of *Creative Writing in Canada*. To the first two of these forms he attributed a lower intrinsic value than to the last, and he argued that the trend away from historical romance and regional idyll was an upward climb towards a higher incarnation as realistic fiction.

The *Literary History of Canada* repeats what is essentially Pacey's theory. Its authors trace with approval the way Canadian literary geography has gradually caught up with the country's actual physical and human geography. A limited number of critically respectable writers are praised for the way they "have confronted their experience with critical independence and have recorded their insights with a new subtlety and technical power." The great mass of less reputable or merely popular writers are condemned or patronized because they "still inhabit romantic worlds which have very little to do with the realities of Canadian life."[1] Only Frye's "Conclusion", which is largely thematic in method, implies a reservation about this easy dismissal. In the eyes of most Establishment critics, realism seems to be the natural form of prose fiction in Canada, the condition towards which it has evolved by a sort of literary natural selection.

What is needed, I suggest, is a different analysis, one conducted in terms which are both less biased and more fundamental. The *Literary History* is strewn with a bewildering variety of terms resulting from the critics' attempts to describe the kinds of writing done by Canadian authors. In the end these terms serve to disguise instead of to reveal the larger overall pattern of development. However, a terminology which describes in a neutral way the basic distinction the critics have made, that between realistic fiction and fiction which is not realistic, is already well-known to criticism. A revealing picture of the development of Canadian fiction, a picture which is closely in accord with the trend of the work actually produced, can be obtained by using the conventional distinction between the "romance" and the "novel". This distinction avoids the confusing multiplicity of *ad hoc* terminology which has grown up, and helps to explain some of the developments, especially in new fiction, which upon occasion have troubled the critics.

Rather than a steady progression towards realism, the development of Canadian fiction reveals a tension between the romance and novel, between "romantic" and "realistic" ways of portraying the world. The basic elements in the pattern are quite simply stated: the emergence in the nineteenth century of the romance as the dominant form; the degeneration of the romance around the turn of the century into more sentimental popular forms; a reaction during the first part of the twentieth century away from the romance and towards the realism of the novel; a brief period at mid-century when the novel was the

prevalent form; and most recently a reappearance of the romance in modern guises. Most of these stages can be traced in the consciously held attitudes of the writers, as well as in the fiction itself.

The first fiction, in the usual sense of the word, written about Canada is *The History of Emily Montague,* published in 1769 by the British authoress Frances Brooke. The first full-length fiction written by a native-born Canadian is *St. Ursula's Convent; or, the Nun of Canada,* published in 1824. Mrs. Brooke's work, despite its romantic subject and attitudes, is arguably the first Canadian novel; *St. Ursula's Convent* is undoubtedly the first Canadian romance. But these books, and the few scattered works which appeared before the great influx of immigration (and thus of potential readers and writers) which occurred during the middle years of the nineteenth century, did not establish any firm literary tradition.

THE TRUE PARENTS of Canadian fiction are the early magazine editors, such as John Gibson of the *Literary Garland,* and the writers, such as Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill, who helped to fill the pages of these magazines. Of course, the books for which Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill are best remembered are not fiction in the usual sense. Nonetheless, considered as proto-fiction, *Roughing it in the Bush* and *The Backwoods of Canada* illustrate the two opposing attitudes to the fictionalizing of experience — what W. D. Gairdner has aptly called "the two realities"[2] — which give birth to the two most common forms of fiction, the romance and the novel.

Mrs. Moodie's heightened emotional aspirations, her distaste for mere physical things, and her fascination with the extreme and the grotesque in human behaviour, are all characteristics which are found in the romance. Mrs. Traill's matter-of-fact vision, her concern with real objects and with comfort, and her view of the social niceties as an evolving set of customs are concerns which underlie the novel — the form of literature most closely allied with bourgeois materialism. Mrs. Traill's actual fiction, such as *The Canadian Crusoes,* although romantic in outlook, is more novelistic in form than is Mrs. Moodie's. Mrs. Traill includes the realities of Canadian life, albeit somewhat softened and sentimentalized, within the framework of her fiction; but when Mrs. Moodie turns to wholly imaginative writing, her sense of what an educated British audience would expect, her sense of what is conventionally correct in fiction, takes over completely. As a result, she produces a series of sentimental and genteel love-stories set in elegant English manor-houses.

In the fiction of nineteenth-century Canada, it is Mrs. Moodie's impulse towards the romance which carries the day. Major Richardson exploits the hair-raising aspects of frontier Indian warfare to provide appropriate action for his

gothic romance, *Wacousta.* In *The Golden Dog* William Kirby views exaggeratedly emotional events centring on love, cruelty, and greed as the proper subject-matter of fiction; as characters he favours the aristocratic personages of the *ancien regime*, preferably those rumoured to have had secret vices and weaknesses of character. Both of these writers have at times been praised for their literary skill, but neither could be held out as a model of historical accuracy or of fidelity to everyday life.

Although writers in nineteenth-century Canada believed their task was worthwhile, being "literary" made them feel isolated. Through their art, they sought to raise audiences to a higher level of cultivation, and thereby to re-establish a sense of social solidarity. Mrs. Moodie had an elevated conception of her role, and a high ideal of the level at which writer and reader should meet. But gradually, as a larger and less educated reading public appeared in the later years of the century, writers lowered their target and came to pursue a wide readership at the expense of standards. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that since there were no established standards for them to uphold, Canadian writers allowed themselves to accept popularity as a measure of merit. Had not Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens been popular in their day? And in Canada, had not Richardson and Kirby imitated Scott and produced works of acknowledged worth? Then the popular writers of their own day, many Canadian writers seemed to feel, provided appropriate models to follow. Novelists imitated American local colour writers or popular British novelists and romancers, especially those of the Kailyard school; poets were influenced by Kipling. The way was soon prepared for Robert Service, with his shamelessly popular sort of verse.

In Canada, then, at the turn of the century, the distinction between serious art and the merely popular was not a clear one. The same writers could be found publishing poems in magazines with intellectual pretensions, and stories in magazines aimed at a broad popular readership. The Confederation poets yearned for a renewed union of artist and audience, and in their pursuit of readers they produced much work which today appears little removed from the level of the hack. Roberts and Campbell both wrote several sentimental romances; Roberts produced his patriotic odes and Campbell his *Sagas of Vaster Britain.* Even D. C. Scott turned out stories of French-Canadian village life which, although on a higher level than the romances of Roberts and Campbell, are still notable excursions into sentimentality and bathos. And Bliss Carman pandered to the popular taste for his brand of romantic escapism combined with vague spiritual uplift.

Like the earlier movements in Canadian fiction, the emergence of the realistic novel was also based on the imitation of foreign models. In this case the inspiration was those later nineteenth-century British writers, such as Meredith, George

Eliot, or Hardy, who wrote for a smaller and more exclusive public than the great Victoria novelists had reached, or the American novelists, like Howells and James, whose work was critical of established social values and sometimes wilfully "difficult" in style.

In Canada the chief spokesman for the new critical realism was Sara Jeannette Duncan. Under her own name and as "Garth Grafton" she conducted columns in the pages of Goldwin Smith's *The Week* which frequently attacked the middle-class values of those she called (by analogy with Matthew Arnold's British Philistines) the Canadian "Maoris". Miss Duncan described the Maori's favourite reading in terms which leave little doubt she was describing the popular romance:

> In fiction he likes a story with a good deal of incident and accident — though he condemns sensationalism — and he likes it to end well. He is particular about the ending, and it not infrequently determines the whole merit of the book for him.[3]

During recent years, she said, fiction had undergone a great transformation, which the Maori seemed totally unable to appreciate:

> The novel of to-day may be written to show the cumulative action of a passion, to work out an ethical problem of every-day occurrence, to give body and form to a sensation of the finest or of the coarsest kind, for almost any reason which can be shown to have a connection with the course of human life, and the development of human character. . . . The old rules by which any habitual novel reader could prophesy truly at the third chapter how the story would "come out" are disregarded, the well-worn incidents discarded, the *sine qua nons* audaciously done without. Fiction has become a law unto itself, and its field has broadened with the assumption.[4]

The outstanding early example of a full-realized realistic novel is also from the pen of Miss Duncan. *The Imperialist* provides a rounded and perceptive anatomy of life at the turn of the century in a Canadian small town. Elgin, Ontario, is populated chiefly by Maoris, with as light admixture of the colonially-minded, and a very sparse leavening of free spirits like Advena Murchison. The book shows how the materialistic values of the town defeat the idealistic Lorne Murchison and uneasily reject the intellectually-inclined Advena. However, criticism of established social values was not a thing Canadian audiences could readily accept. Miss Duncan's barbed comments were not always appreciated by the conservative-minded among her readers — a not inconsiderable class. At only a slightly later date, another Canadian with a considerable gift for social criticism, Stephen Leacock, allowed his talents to be frittered away in meeting the reading public's insatiable appetite for "further foolishness" — or so Robertson Davies has persuasively argued.[5]

A book which strikingly illustrates the Canadian writer's uncertain grasp of

literary forms is Ralph Connor's *The Man from Glengarry*. The first part of the book, in keeping with Connor's stated intention "to so picture these men and their times that they may not drop quite out of mind,"[6] memorably depicts the Glengarry backwoodsmen in terms which magnify but do not destroy their humanity. The tensions within the community, centred on its strict Presbyterian religion, are convincingly portrayed, and the conflict within Ranald Macdonald is well-developed. But in the second portion of the book Connor sidesteps the intense psychological tension he has created by releasing Ranald from the ingrown and repressed east into the free and honest west. In the process he shifts his book from a novel to a romance. From a human being facing difficult moral and social choices, Ranald changes to a peerless embodiment of Christian manliness and virtues — a combination of the Redcrosse knight and the local scoutmaster. The change is more than the book can bear. Conviction is lost and Ranald becomes a cardboard figure. Romance, in its most abased form, triumphs over the initial novelistic impulse.

Although occasional examples of the realistic novel continued to appear in the years immediately before and after World War I, it was not until a new post-war generation had grown up that the critical, realistic attitude became the norm in serious Canadian fiction. The change from romance to novel was not complete until the works of Morley Callaghan and Frederick Philip Grove began to appear during the late twenties and the thirties. Callaghan began his career with novels which contain traces of the theories of environmental determinism held by earlier European and American writers. He progressed to a series of parables which criticize society by comparing it with an ideal standard, derived from a literal application of Christian ideals. Grove deliberately created a series of novels which record the opening of the west during the early years of the century, and analyze the upheavals in moral values and social structures which took place during those years.

After World War II the realistic novel continued to dominate, reaching new heights in the work of Hugh MacLennan and Robertson Davies, as well as in the continuing work of Callaghan. MacLennan's ideas about the writer's task can stand as representative of the views of this group of writers. Like Grove and Callaghan, MacLennan sees himself as a "serious" writer, as opposed to a merely popular one. He and other serious Canadian writers, he says in one of his articles, intend to record aspects of social reality. In so doing they are following in the tradition of the great nineteenth-century British and European novelists who attempted to depict society and human nature in an accurate, realistic manner:

> The serious novel of modern times has usually concentrated on what I have called social symbolism — on man in his relation with organized society, with politics, war, economic conditions, and with the local morals of a specific group.[7]

In the works of Grove, Callaghan, and MacLennan, the triumph of the novel might seem to be complete. Certainly, in their critical theorizing, the novel's urge towards realistic social comment is the dominant element. Yet Callaghan and MacLennan, in many of their books display a longing for heroism, an impulse towards the romance. Many of Callaghan's heroes meet their fate because they have sought to pattern themselves on divine perfection. MacLennan has a strong affinity for the heroic and primitive Odysseus figure, although he habitually, but with great reluctance, destroys him. Even if we believe MacLennan's disclaimer of deliberate intent, the fact remains that the repeated mythic pattern traced by George Woodcock is present in MacLennan's books, providing a strong pressure towards the romance form, within the conventional novelistic framework of MacLennan's fiction.[8]

It has been said that the action of the romance proves the protagonist "to be what he, and the author, and we the readers knew from the start he was — a hero." On the other hand,

> the protagonist of the novel is likely to discover, with Falstaff, that there is no future for heroism, that he himself is a perfectly ordinary man, with the experience and knowledge that suit his station.[9]

In these terms, both Callaghan and MacLennan lean towards romance themes, for they depict small men yearning to be great or pure. It is more from flaws in the arrangement of the world than from flaws in their own nature that Callaghan's heroic idealists perish; the world ought to be different, Callaghan seems to imply. Moral heroism ought to be possible. Grove is more purely the novelist; he depicts men who yearn to be great or pure, and learn they are only men, with finite, mixed natures.

The pivotal chapters in D. G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* and Ronald Sutherland's *Second Image* agree in basing their argument on books in which a strong romance strain can be detected. Most notably, the two critics concur on the thematic importance of MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* and Colin McDougall's *Execution*. The crux of Jones' and Sutherland's argument is that Canadian writers attempt to present solutions to the dilemma of the man who feels the world is not a fair or a reasonable place in which to live. The Canadian protagonist asks: how can I believe there is a purpose and meaning to the seemingly arbitrary events of the world?

The solution, Jones and Sutherland argue, is proposed in individual and existential terms. Canadian fiction takes a personal viewpoint; not a social viewpoint. Grove is our most consistently socially-minded novelist, and his outlook

can be explained as being the result of his wider European background. Abe Spalding, who resolves his quarrel with the universe by finally returning to a full participation in his immediate local community, is not a typical Canadian protagonist. But MacLennan, to take a more representative example, provides romantic resolutions to the national political issues raised in *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes*, as if love could transform political realities; and in *The Watch that Ends the Night* the social issues raised in the book's first portion are quietly shelved in favour of a general consideration of human mortality. McDougall's *Execution* turns away from the larger problems of meaning and justice presented by the events of World War II, and focuses on a redeeming act of personal sacrifice.

Another way of saying that Canadian fiction chooses a personal viewpoint is to say that it prefers the romance to the novel. Frye has said that "the romancer does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes." In the romance, he says, "we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, and villain respectively."[10] Many of the best-known "realistic" Canadian novelists have written late, mature works, recognized as being among their best, which contain such characters. MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* gives us the heroic Jerome Martell and the ethereal, saint-like Catherine. Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* centres on MacAlpine's pursuit of the lovely and idealistic, but not-quite-real Peggy Sanderson, who represents all that is best and most innocent within his own soul. Robertson Davies, whose first three novels were the epitome of social dissection, has turned in *Fifth Business* and *The Manticore* to the theme of inner self-discovery, and has filled his pages with hints of intangible powers, and with characters or dream-visions who seem to be projections of the central character's psyche.

Recent writers, those who began publishing in the late fifties and the sixties, have turned away from literal realism. Books like Cohen's enigmatic *Beautiful Losers*, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*, or Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* are essentially modern versions of the romance. In this modern fiction, the mythic underpinnings of fictional structures are again being brought close to the surface. Although Mordecai Richler, when he is not writing satire or journalism, turns out traditional novels, he is an exception among post-war writers. In general the writer has retreated to, or perhaps simply reoccupied, the ground which he alone can best inhabit. Literal realism has been abandoned to the writers of non-fiction and to the moviemakers.

Although it may be true, as Frye has suggested, that "of the general principles of cultural history we still know relatively little,"[11] it is possible to suggest an explanation for the strength of the romance strain in Canadian fiction. Canadians have traditionally lacked confidence in their own country and in its culture and institutions. The studies of Jones and Sutherland, along with Margaret

Atwood's *Survival*, suggest that English-Canadian writing (and Sutherland adds French-Canadian fiction) is characterized by a profoundly negative outlook, by insecurities and feelings of victimization. Canadian writers cannot with conviction base their faith in life on an analysis, much less a celebration, of a society they see as a trap or a cage. Instead, writers have turned to inner experience in their attempt to rebuild the fabric of meaning left in tatters by the decay of all fixed systems.

Like writers the world over, Canadian writers have decided that in a world apparently gone mad, sanity must be sought within the self, if anywhere. The romance, rather than the novel, is the most suitable vehicle for such introspective explorations of inner space. But there is also a uniquely Canadian predisposition to this form, for the romance is a better vehicle than the novel for exploring the pastoral vision which Frye suggests characterizes the Canadian imagination. The "peaceable kingdom" is an inner and self-contained realm; it is not compatible with the world of assumed public masks and social intricacies which is the realistic novel's supporting ambiance. If the peaceable kingdom is to be found anywhere, its home is not in the novel's harsh, uncompromising landscapes, but somewhere within the gentler world of the romance.

NOTES

[1] Hugo McPherson, "Fiction: 1940 to 1960," *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 694, 722.

[2] "Traill and Moodie: the two Realities," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I.3 (1972), 35-42.

[3] "The Maori," *The Week*, III (July 22, 1886), 548.

[4] "Outworn Literary Methods," *The Week*, IV (June 9, 1887), 451.

[5] *Stephen Leacock* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970).

[6] "Preface," *The Man from Glengarry*, ed. S. Ross Beharriell (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), p. xiii.

[7] "Do We Gag our Writers?" *MacLean's*, XXVI (March 1, 1947), 52.

[8] "A Nation's Odyssey: the Novels of Hugh MacLennan," *Canadian Literature* 10 (Autumn 1961), 7-18; reprinted in *Odysseus Ever Returning* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970). McLennan's rejoinder appeared in *Canadian Literature* 13 (Summer 1962), 86-7.

[9] Maurice Z. Schroder, "The Novel as a Genre," in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 15.

[10] *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 304.

[11] "Conclusion," *Literary History of Canada*, p. 822.