

MANNERS OF CRITICISM

MANNERS OF CRITICISM, like those of any other art, change constantly, sometimes in response to impulses that are worldwide, more often in response to the changing circumstances of an individual culture. But, while in certain areas of life change involves obsolescence, this is not the case with good criticism, any more than it is the case with good poetry or good fiction. We may not, for example, be able to imagine ourselves writing as Dryden or Arnold wrote, but that does not prevent us from responding to many aspects of their work: its insights into authors who were their contemporaries, its reflection of the mores of their period, its statements of critical principle whose application extends beyond their age, and, finally, its quality as prose.

It was thoughts of this kind that came to my mind when I re-read W. E. Collin's *The White Savannas*, which appeared first in 1936 as a self-consciously modernist critique of Canadian poetry, and which has now been reprinted in the University of Toronto Press's Literature of Canada series (paper back, \$5.95), with an excellent introduction by Germaine Warkentin. Re-reading *The White Savannas* at the same time as I was looking back over the English critics who were influenced by the post-Romantic French tradition (Sainte-Beuve, Baudelaire, the Symbolists in general), critics like Pater and Arthur Symonds, I recognized a kind of period tone that could not have been repeated with any authenticity of feeling after about 1939, though its analogues might be picked up at any time back to the 1880's. In his kind of tremulous excitement over literature, Collin belonged by temperament to the earlier half of the twentieth century, and it seems significant that all his three books were published by 1936, and that though he still lives, 39 years afterwards, his production since World War II has consisted

of a handful of articles, the last of which appeared a decade ago, and the last but one 19 years ago.

Professor Warkentin bravely attempts to place Collin in the hierarchy of Canadian criticism, but she rightly finds the greatest strength of *The White Savannahs* in its author's "sense of immediacy". She goes on, and in my view less surely, to pin him into place, as she puts *The White Savannahs* "squarely between two types of Canadian criticism".

At one extreme is the work of the strictly historical critic as practiced by Carl Klinck, Collin's contemporary at Western Ontario. At the other is the elaborate system-building of Northrop Frye. Between them is Collin, resolving difficulties by the continuous practice of the critic's 'art of reading'. For such an art to flourish the critic must have a profound belief in the life of literature.

What Professor Warkentin seems to suggest, even if she does not do so deliberately, is that, being between Klinck and Frye, Collin has some of the historical attitude and some of the system-making. But in fact one finds little trace of conscious systematizing in Collin's work, and only enough history to relate works to the lives of their authors and to the similar works of other authors. The stress, even when comparisons are made, is always on the poetry and on the reader's direct relationship to it, and to my mind Germaine Warkentin is much nearer the truth — and perhaps gives us the whole truth — in another passage where she remarks: "*The White Savannahs* is not a principled modernist tract but an excited report by a brilliant and only partially informed mind about the current state of affairs at the creative frontier of a new literature."

The White Savannahs was in fact part of the process by which Collin became a Canadian critic; it must be seen, to realize the full significance of the man's contribution to our critical tradition, in relation to the essays he wrote on French Canadian poetry at the same time as he was compiling the annual survey of Québec literature for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, a task he continued from 1940-1946. Unfortunately, he did not sustain his commentary on Canadian poetry in English over the same period, and so we are forced to judge his work in that field according to the limitations of his experience when he wrote *The White Savannahs* in the mid-thirties.

Essentially, the basic experience was one he shared with many English writers and scholars between the 1890's and the 1930's, who fell in love with French post-Romantic literature, and were not only profoundly impressed by the poetry and fiction of the Symbolists (who continually crop up in *The White Savannahs*), but also adopted the easy and at times meandering manner of the Sainte-Beuve

causerie, which does not regard keeping to the point as a totally necessary virtue. Unlike the younger Canadian critics of our own day, Collin is not in *The White Savannahs* conscious of a self-contained national literature, within which all the necessary cross-references can be made; the consciousness of such a literature hardly existed at all in the 1930's. And so he is constantly, and without arousing any feeling of inappropriateness, referring back to models in French and English (but rarely American) traditions. Even when he points to the political affiliations of Canadian poets in the 1930's, he tends to see them in the context of the leftism of the English 1930's.

The choices he makes among the poets of the time partly reflect his unsureness of the terrain, but they also emphasize the erosion of the decades on passing reputations. Time has declared Pratt, Klein, Smith, Scott and Livesay to be the poetic winners of the 1930's, and it says much for Collin's acuteness of judgment that he picked them and discussed them with so much sympathy and understanding. But Marjorie Pickthall and Leo Kennedy are poets whose standing has declined greatly in recent years, and re-reading their poetry gives one little confidence that it will rise again. In praising them, one feels, Collin let himself be guided by the whims of the time rather than by a sense of sound poetry. Then there are the two mysteries of the book. Why, alone among the earlier Canadian poets, did Collin pick Archibald Lampman? Why not D. C. Scott and Charles G. D. Roberts as well? Was it perhaps because their success in accepted careers somehow repelled Collin, while Lampman's isolation and unhappiness, his bitter-sweet tone and his sense of failure, appealed to a romantic sense of the poet's lot? And why, instead of any of the Francophone writers of the time who were Canadian by birth and background, did he choose Marie Le Franc, metropolitan French by origin and an immigrant like himself? Today Marie Le Franc is even less remembered than Pickthall or Kennedy, and she seems a strange choice indeed for a man who afterwards became so knowledgeable in the poetry of Québec.

Nevertheless, and despite the shortcomings inevitable in any book on modernism in Canadian poetry written as early as the 1930's, *The White Savannahs* is a vital work that even now transmits some of the excitement that went into its writing, while readers who have become accustomed to regarding Northrop Frye as the original fount of mythopoeic criticism in Canada will be intrigued by Collin's emphasis on the role of the poet as myth-maker, and his frequent references to that epoch-making masterpiece, source and mirror of so much in modern poetry, *The Golden Bough*.

Criticism in Canada has changed since *The White Savannahs*, not merely in

attitude, but also in techniques, and at least one end of it touches on areas of exact scholarship of a kind that in the 1930's were never applied to Canadian authors. *Editing Canadian Texts*, collected by Frances G. Halpenny (and published by A. W. Hakkert with no price indicated) presents the papers given at the Conference on Editorial Problems held at the University of Toronto in 1972, and attended by no less than 75 scholars in the field. W. H. New introduces the proceedings with a general survey of the peculiar problems of editing Canadian texts, and the remaining speakers proceed into special fields, Bruce Nesbitt discussing the editions of Lampman, and Desmond Pacey the letters of Frederick Philip Grove, Pierre Savard talking on the critical edition of François-Xavier Garneau's complete works, and Sheila Fischman ending with a very interesting account of the editing of *Ellipse*, the journal devoted to publishing translated texts in both Canadian languages. *Editing Canadian Texts* is provocative reading because it suggests more than it says, and leaves one in no doubt that with the acquisition of a history, the study of Canadian writing has also acquired those peculiar problems arising out of the natural reticences and deceptions of writers which occupy scholastic critics in any developed literary culture.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

SUNSET

Peter Stevens

The low sun is looking you straight
 in the eye. Paddling up that stare
 you cannot splice his golden disc;
 the headland shuts sudden
 an eyelid closing upwards the gold
 then you float
 in the spread bruise the sun
 has basilisk'd from the dying day-
 light.

The moon drops blue
 milk onto the lake.