

CANADIAN LITERATURE AND COMMONWEALTH RESPONSES

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WE HAVE GROWN into a habit in Canada of thinking ourselves influenced rather than influential, and imitative rather than innovative. By diminishing creative effort before looking closely at works of art, such attitudes turn a lock on criticism. Nothing firmer than faint praise is possible. And if we wait constantly for the flowering of a recognizably distinctive Canadian culture, we risk ignoring that which exists already, that which has emerged and emerges from our way of living and looking at the world, is implicitly Canadian, and is alive. I am not denying the existence of influences upon Canadian literature, nor decrying the skills involved in technical imitation and creative parody; by trying to distinguish between influence and simple response, however, I am concerned with showing how the experience of the world can enter, without controlling, Canadian perspectives.

"Influence" suggests that an author surrenders his identity to a direction outside himself or his culture; "response" leaves the control in the author's own hand, and too often we confuse the two. At one extreme, if authors respond to phenomena outside Canada, critics merely wonder what was wrong with Canada that it didn't provide the same stimulus. Under these conditions, nationality becomes the significant criterion in making literary assessments rather than simply a description of cultural source. For example, the poems Earle Birney wrote in response to his experiences of South America and Asia inspired reviews which questioned their Canadian-ness and wondered when the poet would get around to writing as well about his own country. Like Milton's Satan, however — and Birney the Romantic would I hope appreciate the comparison — the sensitive artist carries his "own country" with him wherever he goes. The sensitive critic must follow, appreciating the landscape in whatever direction it expands. In an age of mobility, one in which rapid transit and mass media give the artist physical as well as

mental running room, the occasions for meeting disparate experiences — for responding to them and for being responded to — multiply drastically. I want here to probe only some of those associations, to consider Canadian writers in relation to their Commonwealth responses and counterparts, and to indicate some of the directions that future criticism might usefully pursue.

If we start by throwing England out of the Commonwealth for a minute, thus peremptorily getting rid of the need to discuss visitors to England and direct contacts with English cultural traditions, we are still left with an intricate network of Canadian-Commonwealth literary relationships. Earle Birney observing the Caribbean, Asia, and the South Pacific; Sara Jeannette Duncan or George Woodcock in India; P. K. Page in Australia; Dave Godfrey, Audrey Thomas, Margaret Laurence, David Knight, Dorothy Livesay, and others in various parts of Africa — all reflect a direct experience with a foreign landscape that not only becomes transformed into metaphor in any particular work but also helps direct the course of each writer's separate literary development. The discovery of Africa or Asia, that is, does not remain static; it contributes to the progress of each literary mind.

As Audrey Thomas puts it in *Mrs. Blood*, a novel set partly in Ghana:

There are smells here which will always be part of Africa for me; and yet if someone asked later what Africa was like and I said 'Mansion Polish', or 'Dettol', or 'the smell of drying blood', they wouldn't understand. And they would be right not to, for the real Africa (whatever that may mean) is none of these and my Africa is only real for me.

And for her central character, Africa is a metaphor for an experience to which she cannot adapt, a vitality she ambivalently loves but from which she is constantly separated, an environment in which a place name like Freetown utters sharply dislocating ironies, forcing her back into the harassing uneasiness of her own self. Margaret Laurence, at the opening of her autobiographical account of life in East Africa, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, poses the question even more explicitly:

Nothing can equal in hope and apprehension the first voyage east of Suez, yourself eager for all manner of oddities, pretending to disbelieve in marvels lest you appear naive but anticipating them just the same, prepared for anything, prepared for nothing, burdened with baggage — most of it useless, unburdened by knowledge, . . . bland as eggplant and as innocent of the hard earth as a fledgling sparrow. . . .

And in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself.

The trick is to glimpse oneself both as person and as writer. The admittedly white-liberal biases that helped impel Mrs. Laurence to translate Somali poetry for her first published book, *A Tree for Poverty*, added to her knowledge of the continent. So did the friendship with Nigerian writers like Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe, which later contributed to the modulated judgments of her African literary commentary, *Long Drums and Cannons*. They left her, however, still an outsider. To place any of the works of Achebe, Ngugi, Ekwensi, Oyono, or p'Bitek beside *This Side Jordan* is to see how much more sharply defined the cultural conflict is in the African novels. In Ghanaian fiction, moreover — in the vitriol of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* and the traditional village commitments of the stories of Christina Ama Ata Aidoo — the pressures of language and of modernity carry an accompanying threat of deracination; to sense that is to appreciate more fully the fundamental differences between one kind of African cultural desolation and whatever is experienced in Canada.

Yet Margaret Laurence learned more than just the subtleties of characterization, the attraction of exotic settings, and the force of provocative metaphor from the writing of *This Side Jordan* and *The Tomorrow-Tamer*. She learned to probe the nature of freedom, to examine the relationship between hierarchical traditional order and the contemporary thrust towards individuality, and to take her discoveries back into her own culture. In 1969 she spelled out something of her changing awareness of Africa, the metamorphosis of the exotic marvel into (at once) a burgeoning reality and a metaphor for a quality of mind:

I guess I will always care about Africa. But the feeling I had, in everything I wrote about it, isn't the feeling I have now. It would be easy to convey the impression that I've become disillusioned with the entire continent, but this would be a distortion. What has happened, with Africa's upheavals, has been happening all over the world. Just as I feel that Canadians can't say *them* when we talk of America's disastrous and terrifying war in Vietnam, so I feel we can't say *them* of Africans. What one has come to see, in the last decade, is that tribalism is an inheritance of us all. Tribalism is not such a bad thing, if seen as the bond which an individual feels with his roots, his ancestors, his background. It may or may not be stultifying in a personal sense, but that is a problem each of us has to solve or not solve. Where tribalism becomes, to my mind, frighteningly dangerous is where the tribe — whatever it is, the Hausa, the Ibo, the Scots Presbyterians, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the in-group — is seen as 'the people', the human beings, and the others, the un-tribe, are seen as sub-human. This is not Africa's problem alone; it is everyone's.¹

Such an assertion does not insist on an identity between, say, Vanessa McLeod's loving rejection of her Calvinist grandfather in *A Bird in the House* and the uncertain growth of Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, even though both characters find themselves continually influenced by the very traditions they have tried consciously to reject. The stories differ both tonally and in the extent of their cultural implications. But Margaret Laurence does insist on the principles of humanitarianism that transcend cultures, to which her affirmation of particular ancestral traditions gives form and by which, at the same time, restrictive customs are liberated. Her response to Africa was thus based upon her Canadian preconceptions and became the lens through which she re-examined and managed to voice them. Africa was both object observed and the subjective reshaper of experience; it did not absorb the artist, but rather stirred artistry into being.

IN THE POETRY of Dorothy Livesay, we find a comparable African response, one that grows out of and contributes to the Poet's own developing point-of-view. The blend of lyricism and social conscience that characterized such early poems as "The Child Looks Out" or "Day and Night" had already given Dorothy Livesay a distinctive voice by the time UNESCO sent her to Zambia in 1959. A sensitivity to rhythm and a deliberate attempt to manipulate it for impassioned documentary purposes were only two of the features of her verse that resulted from that union. What Africa did was intensify her commitment to social causes, and immerse her — however slightly — in an oral culture, where the rhythms of speech had significant meaning and implicitly articulated the society's shared myth.

To illustrate what I mean by "implicit articulation", I want to refer to a book called *Muntu*, which probes the underlying principles of African culture. The author, Janheinz Jahn, writes about the spoken word as follows:

All magic is word magic, incantation and exorcism, blessing and curse. Through Nommo, the word, man establishes his mastery over things. . . .

If there were no word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no procreation, no change, no life. 'There is nothing that there is not; whatever we have a name for, that is'; so speaks the wisdom of the Yoruba priests. The proverb signifies that the naming, the enunciation produces what it names. Naming is an incantation, a creative act. What we cannot conceive of is unreal; it does not exist. But every human thought, once expressed, becomes reality. For the word holds the course of

things in train and changes and transforms them. And since the word has this power, every word is an effective word, every word is binding. There is no 'harmless', non-committal word. Every word has consequences. Therefore the word binds the muntu. And the muntu is responsible for his word.

The force, responsibility, and commitment of the word, and the awareness that the word alone alters the world; these are characteristics of African culture. . . .

But Nommo, the word, "precedes the image", is given "cultural significance" only by the *muntu* — by *man* (alive and dead, ancestor and deified ancestor altogether) — making the essence of language not a received vocabulary through which (as in Europe) a nation "understands its own cultural unity", but the creative, transmuting "way of using speech" that "places function ahead of object".

Dorothy Livesay acknowledges as much — and like Margaret Laurence admits her separateness from the culture she watches — when in her poem "Village" she speaks of the people who "do not love this place, or name it/ they are too much of it/ . . . / Between the land and themselves/ they feel no difference." Yet like Armah's Ghana and Achebe's Nigeria, Zambian society in the 20th century is beset by European modernism and awaits a reconciliation with its traditional past. The electrifying, potentially revolutionary visions of Alice Lenchina of the Lumpa sect were one result of such tension, and they stimulated in the early 1960's a remarkable social unrest, which the country's new nationalism could not altogether answer. Dorothy Livesay responded with her poem "The Prophetess", in which the rhythmic changes and incantatory repetitions draw upon the sounds of the drum culture.

One cannot, however, describe "The Prophetess" as a drum poem — a poem cycle called *Masks* by the Caribbean poet Edward Brathwaite shows how much further the technique can be taken — nor see it as "African" in anything but setting. It is sharpened, shaped, by an African experience, but it reworks themes of discrimination and childbirth that Dorothy Livesay had explored before, and it relates in its technique not just to drums but also to theories about speech patterns and incantatory effects that had become prevalent in Vancouver poetry circles by the time she returned from Africa. The continuing sensitivity to poetic technique that allowed her then to respond to the work of, for example, George Bowering and Bill Bissett, urged *The Unquiet Bed* (in which "The Prophetess" and "Village" appear) into the form it took; but Africa seems to have been a key experience in provoking that continuing sensitivity in the first place. Taking

her out of her culture, it made her conscious of her own identity — a recognition which let her poetic identity acquire new dimensions.

If Laurence and Thomas and Livesay in various ways utter a division between themselves and Africa which overrides their subjective possession of an African experience, Hubert Aquin, in his novel *Trou de Mémoire*, works from an intellectual proposition to insist on a metaphysical unity. The correspondence that opens his novel, that is, between an Ivory Coast revolutionary pharmacist and a Montreal one, rapidly develops beyond letter-writing into an identifying set of personality correspondences that blend character and give depth to the plot. Essentially what it underlines is an identity between the defiance of imperial power in West Africa and what Aquin sees as the need for revolutionary action in Quebec. David Knight's novel *Farquharson's Physique and what it did to his mind* probes a related issue: that of the personal effects of political involvement, the relationship between public and private identities and the upsets that occur when they war with each other inside a single culture or personality. (The existence of all these works, incidentally, emphasizes the need for further comparative studies of French- and English-language literatures in Canada; their differing perspectives often focus on the same issues and the fact that they might prove complementary warrants sympathetic examination.)

The contrast David Knight draws between idealistic and pragmatic political options relates to what Margaret Laurence says about tribalism as well as to Hubert Aquin's activism. But it is in Dave Godfrey's *The New Ancestors* that we find a more impassioned blend of Laurence's cultural sensitivity and Aquin's political fervour, and a more direct insistence on the necessity for metaphysics in modern Western life. Godfrey acknowledges, in other words, not just the Margaret Laurence sentiment that "the strangest glimpses . . . in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself", but also the intensification of that statement as we can see it in, for example, Mircea Eliade's *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*. Quoting Heinrich Zimmer, Eliade affirms that a dialogue with the "true" African or Asian will help a Westerner rediscover a "universally valid" spiritual outlook, for "it is only after a pious journey in a distant region, in a new land, that the meaning of that inner voice guiding us on our search can make itself understood by us".

This belief, I take it, is what underlies the hallucinative, visionary "Fifth City" episode in *The New Ancestors*; it seeks the functions of African art, those of placing the independent forces of nature at man's command, of creating new reality, or issuing imperatives to time, and of fascinating (rather than arguing) its listeners to the conclusions that reside in its manner of expression. What ought to

result is a recognition of a valid life pattern, but such a discovery rests also on one's sensitivity to ancestral traditions. To quote from *Muntu* again:

The past has a double function. On one side it is Kintu, the stuff of forces, which is awakened in images and ordered and transformed with reference to the future. On the other hand it is a pattern for the future, for it contains the wisdom of the ancestors, the knowledge of the order which is held to shape the present.

The political irony in Godfrey's book comes from his recognition of the artificiality of traditions currently being followed either in the Lost Coast of his novel or, by implication, in the Canada to which he himself is committed. To transfer allegiance to valid spiritual beliefs, to find "new ancestors" in other words, is a difficult task in the face of modern political pressures. It perhaps becomes a political as well as an ethical quest simply because of that. In any event it is inherently uncertain of its outcome. The literary method Godfrey employs to capture such tension — and to lead us, by fascination, to moral conclusions — involves him in cumulative references to African proverbs and quantum theory. The one serves as a kind of incantatory counterpoint, a flowing commentary that goes unnoticed in rigid contemporary political systems; the other voices a scientific theory of uncertainty that underlies the constant metamorphosis of energy forces. The function of such references is to remind us of the moral order absent from modern thinking and the fact that order is not a necessary or an easy result of any change. Despite such an equivocal prognosis, Godfrey is ultimately committed to action, committed to change, because only in constant re-creation can the forces that permeate life be awakened into images and made, in an African sense, "real". To participate in the making of that reality is his function as artist; to appreciate the nature of that function is to discover the interpenetration of a world of things (of images and objects) and the world of spiritual apprehension which the African "way of using speech" implicitly conveys.

EARLE BIRNEY IN Asia becomes another of Mircea Eliade's spiritual travellers to a distant region, but though his fundamental premise is not dissimilar to Godfrey's — dissatisfaction with the way American and European mythic structures impede any true expression of the Canadian imagination — the method he discovers for his art differs markedly. Where Godfrey found *word*, Birney finds *silence*; where Godfrey found a way to animate the world of things, Birney found a consciousness of the vitality of *Nada*; where Godfrey found a

culture that controlled time through artistic utterance, Birney finds a culture whose art acknowledges time but rejects its final authority. When in "Bangkok Boy" he celebrates a moment of joy that is forever, or when in "A Walk in Kyoto" he distinguishes between the script of language and "the simple song of a man", or when in "The Bear on the Delhi Road" he plays with the word "fabulous" in order to demonstrate the persistent reality of myth and the essentially insubstantial trance of empirical reality, we find examples of the way in which Asian culture has affected Birney's poetry. My point is not to assert that a radical change occurs in his viewpoint; what Asia seems to have done is to crystallize for Birney the essence of what he had long sought, to make apparent what the direction of his work had seen. When in earlier poems he had asserted freedom and the expanse of a new land, he drew his images from European myth. Like European explorers, he was seeking to articulate a "Strait of Anian" that would open the west to European access. The title of *Near False Creek Mouth* emphasizes the matter. "False Creek", an inlet of salt water that slices Vancouver part way, from west to east, was thought by early explorers to be the Strait of Anian; at that point they were trying to connect to Europe, to find a fast route home. Birney, however, comes in "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth", to stand reflectively near the western edge of the inlet, between the commercial empire that has expanded to the coast and the Orient out at sea. In that midway position, sensitive to both the European traditions and the Oriental mysticism that attract and exert their influence upon him, he locates the imaginative ground which as Canadian artist he accepts as distinctively his own.

If the pre-Asian poems fret about aging and the passing of time, the post-Asian poems acknowledge and accept it. If the early work seeks specific historical roots, the later work discovers a universality of spirit that transcends place and time. If the poems of the 1940's and 1950's press constantly for a fresh language of poetry, the most recent poems of the 1970's strive for the insights of vision that concrete poetry at its most successful can allow. Its design is not an escape from language, but an intensification of the vitality that language tries to render. In creating concrete poems he does not deny the word; he merely rejects the process of definition, of limitation, that words often impose on life. Writers like Margaret Avison and F. R. Scott have noted a comparable frustration with language and resolved their dilemma as much as they can by experimenting with patterns of print and sound. For Birney, encountering the Caribbean, Asia, and the South Pacific has been instrumental in allowing him to articulate the relation between that problem of artistic method and what he sees to be the central tensions in

Canadian experience. The Asian poems are not extraneous to his work, in other words; they grow from it, bear upon it, and therefore expand the literary consciousness which in Canada we can accept as our own.

CANADIAN WRITERS are not the only ones to travel and respond, however, and in the work of the South African and Barbadian émigrés in Canada, John Peter and Austin Clarke, we find reactions to Canada that give us a different perspective towards our image and towards the whole question of Commonwealth literary interaction. To read the works of Douglas Stewart, a New Zealander in Australia, or Clive Barry, an Australian in Africa, or William Hart-Smith, an Australian in New Zealand, or Vic Reid, a Guyanese in Africa, or Peter Abrahams, a South African in Jamaica, is to observe comparable processes of literary adaptation taking place. The point is that the new environment swims somehow into each writer's existing cultural commitments. John Peter's Canada, therefore, becomes as politicized as the South Africa he left behind, the South Africa that appears in the works of Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson, or Alan Paton; and Austin Clarke's glimpses of Toronto in, say, *The Meeting Point*, ripple with all the racial indignation and implosive laughter of his countrymen George Lamming and Edward Brathwaite. When Peter tries to characterize the Canadian physiognomy, for example, a swift stereotype results, not a careful portrait; a character in *Take Hands at Winter* "even looked like a Canadian, raw-boned and rangy — a cowboy with a disconcertingly English voice". It is an outsider's view. In another book, *Along that Coast*, Canadian society comes in for comparable description; a Canadian visitor to South Africa has this to say:

"In Canada you don't seem to be really *in* the world. Whatever the real issues are today they aren't present, or at least they aren't tangibly present. They don't seem to impinge. It's in other countries that the real progress seems to be going on. Not progress, I guess you'd have to say evolution. . . . Canada's a backwater. I don't mean it's backward of course, I mean it's out of touch, off centre. . . . What's the most important single problem anywhere in the world, for this century? It's the problem of race, isn't it? It's *our* revolution, the Racial Revolution. It's going on all over Africa and Asia and the only way to get some idea of it is to come out to a place like this. The real twentieth century's here. We've got cars and television and things but in Canada the century's indeterminate.

Ignoring for a moment the style and simplistic tendencies of the argument, it is possible to link its viewpoint with that of writers like Aquin and Vallières. But to

say that is to link Peter with the most politicized (and in some sense, therefore, atypical) of Canadian writers. A different approach to the passage would observe what exposure to Canadian society has done for Peter's own perspective. In exile from a situation to which he has a strong moral reaction, he finds ways of making comparisons that will clarify his relationship with the moral issue; comparison becomes a dominant technical device, then, by which his work communicates its political stance.

As Peter and Clarke are variously aware, the racial situation that stirs such a character as Laura Hunt to seek twentieth century reality in South Africa exists merely to a different degree in Canada itself. The tribulations of Bernice Leach, a West Indian maid in Toronto, in *The Meeting Point*, demonstrate the matter clearly. In some ways more poignant, however, is a scene in Clarke's earlier *The Survivors of the Crossing*, a novel about social and economic inequalities in the Barbados plantation system. In it, a rebellious character named Rufus is disabused of his ideal vision of Canada. A co-worker named Jackson, who had earlier tried to buck the system and been run off the island, has been writing his friends in vivid terms:

Boysie took the crackling letter from his pocket, cleared his throat five or six times, and began reading it aloud.

'*Dear Rufus*', he read, paraphrasing it to suit the temperament of the meeting. '*Life up here in Canada is the same thing as living in Goat-heaven and Kiddy-kingdom. . . . and if a man is a hustling kind of man, and if any of them fellars what working on the plantation is hustling kinds of men, they could bring home eighty, ninety, even a hundred dollars on pay-day. That is what Canada means. That is advanced, progressive living.*'

But when Rufus, in trouble with the plantation authorities, actually telephones Jackson to announce his wish to emigrate too, Jackson says:

"You wake me up from sleeping. I vexed as arse. I just come home from washing off cars, and I tired as a dog. Rufus? Rufus? Lis'en to me! I say I tired as a horse. I write you a letter, but I had to write that kind o' letter — But, by the way, you not thinking o' making me pay for this blasted long-distance tellyphone call, eh? 'Cause I is a car-washer, and the money is only eighty cents a' hour! Rufus? You still there? I sorry to paint a technicolour picture o' the place, but, Jesus Christ, man! I couldn't let you know that up here in this country is the same slavery as what I run from back in the island — you understand, Rufus? Rufus?"

The passage carries an emotional authority even if stopped at that point, but Clarke has another purpose in mind as well; he wants not simply to probe the

ways in which a whole class of people is socially enslaved, but also to demonstrate the ambivalent effects of the difference between the reality of a place and the ostensible realities that get marketed to people outside it. He makes his character Boysie pick up the dangling telephone receiver that Rufus has abandoned, therefore, accept matter-of-factly how Rufus has been misled, but in the same breath ask Jackson blandly to send him a Roy Rogers shirt. Though empirical realities are openly articulated, the stereotype somehow lives on in a different compartment of Boysie's mind. The capacity for endurance that that represents mingles with an awareness at the same time of its blind, perhaps obstinate inaccuracy. The laughter that Clarke demands from his reader by the end of the scene is therefore tinged with both fond amusement and savage irony. The combination of humanitarian and reformist principles that guides the author's stance makes his satire gentle towards individuals like Boysie, but with types and institutions and liberal pretension it is concurrently severe. Canada, the pretend-liberal benefactor and absentee landlord in the Caribbean, comes in, therefore, for searing exposure.

Earle Birney's South American poems spell out the extent to which Canadians he observes share in many of the material grossnesses of North American life; characters like the lady monologist of "Most of a dialogue in Cuzco" participate in all the narrowmindedness of the Oregon truck-driver in "Billboards Build Freedom of Choice". In so far as Madison Avenue has educated Canadian taste, the glimpses of America that one finds in Balachandra Rajan's *Too Long in the West* pertain to Canada too. The satiric tone is dispassionate, however, and though critical, somewhat bemused. Unlike Clarke's characters, Rajan's touring Indian student Nalini manages to adapt successfully to her new environment; though she is unrealistic before she arrives in New York, for example, she does not have to surrender her preconceived illusions because life in New York appears to be so bizarre that she can translate it into her own terms. The result of her initial encounter with the city is one of the book's most splendidly comic scenes:

She seated herself precisely on a swivelling stool that was designed for someone with fourteen and a half inch hips. She disdained to reach for the menu; she had already read articles about American cuisine and knew what she should order to qualify as a citizen.

'I'll have Boston clam chowder,' she said, 'and roast stuffed, young Vermont turkey. With golden-brown, melt-in-your-mouth Idaho potatoes. And king-sized, tree-ripened California peaches.'

'We got chop suey,' the girl said, 'and Swedish meat balls and Swiss steak. But we ain't got none of the fancy stuff you're wanting.'

'Then I'll have a hamburger,' Nalini insisted, doggedly.

'You want it with French fries?'

'I want it,' said Nalini, clenching her pretty teeth, 'with potatoes that taste of American earth, fried in the only way they should be, in butter fresh as a New England welcome. And then I'll have pie like your grandmother used to bake it when America was real and itself.'

'You mean, home fried,' the girl reproved her. 'Why don't you say so instead of letting your hair down? And the pie's ten cents extra with French ice-cream.'

With a sigh of resignation, Nalini settled down to her international repast. When it was over, she took again to the roads of discovery. A tree-ripened smile beckoned to her from the shop window opposite. She walked up and looked cautiously into the face. It belonged to a man with a Louisiana shrimp complexion.

'I want some Palestinian oranges,' Nalini said. She had learned her lesson well. To be truly American one had to be exotic.

'What's wrong with Florida?' the man demanded grimly.

'I'm sorry,' she apologised. 'I've been on the wrong side of the street. I'll take a half-dozen, sun-drenched, passion-kissed tangerines.'

He looked at her approvingly. 'You sure know what's good for you.' He tossed some photogenic fruit into a bag and played an amorous tune on his cash register. 'They're sixty-eight cents a dozen and worth double. Wrapped in cellophane to seal in the goodness. Want anything else, honey? The egg plant today is super-special.'

Her faith in America was restored. Here was a civilisation that grew eggs instead of hatching them. It seemed rather a pointless thing to do, but creative energy in its nature often had to be pointless. . . .

'I'll take two of them,' she said.

With Rajan, Clarke, Peter and others we find writers responding both to specific locales and to the idea of North America, the issues and attitudes that North American society represents in their own culture. When the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris responds to Malcolm Lowry, by contrast, finding in his work

a drama of living consciousness, a drama within which one responds not only to the overpowering and salient features of the plane of existence . . . but to the essence of life, to the instinctive grains of life which continue striving and working in the imagination for fulfilment, a visionary character of fulfilment,²

he is responding not to Canada and the Canadians but to the fictional world that exists within Malcolm Lowry's own books. Harris's range of response is remarkably wide, of course; he finds "daring intimations" of visionary fulfilment

in the peculiar style and energy of Australian novelists like Patricia White and Hal Porter, a French novelist like Claude Simon, an English/Canadian novelist like

Malcolm Lowry and an African problematic writer like Tutuola. Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano* is set in Mexico where it achieves a tragic reversal of the material climate of our time, assisted by residual images, landscape as well as the melting pot of history, instinctive to the cultural environment of the Central and South Americas.

Such endeavour imaginatively to discover and distil the patterns that emerge from the "native life and passion" characterizes Harris's own work and incidentally helps give it its challenge. One route into it is through the relationship with other Commonwealth writers to whom Harris has expressed an affinity; in discovering their worlds, they seek their culture's imaginative soul, they seek to transcend the material landscape in order to be enfranchised in the discovery of spiritual illumination. The particulars will vary from society to society; the literary techniques may differ; the purpose of the task and the quality of the response, however, remain essentially the same.

Something of the same symbiotic relationship accounts for the Australian poet A. D. Hope's response to P. K. Page. Page's own reactions to Australia — couched in poems like "Cook's Mountains" or "Bark Drawing", with their evocation of the simple power of private sight — express a characteristically personal reflection of a visited landscape. Hope, by contrast — though equally in character for him — manages to respond to Page herself, and to her language, country, and point-of-view, in such a way as to intellectualize about the nature and function of poetry. The key poem to pay tribute to Page is called "Soledades of the Sun and the Moon", written in 1957 and included in her *Collected Poems*. Its title draws for its metaphor on Page's 1944 novel *The Sun and the Moon*; what Hope does with it is apply it to the difference between the Australian and Canadian sensibilities as exemplified in the work of Page and himself, and to celebrate the meeting of these "solitudes":

The hemispheres set their crystal walls between. . . .
 Yet, through the burning circles of desire,
 Immortal spirits behold, each in the other:
 His pillar of flame serene,
 She, the unknown somnambulist of her fire.

 Only in space, not time, the pattern changes:
 Over your land of memory, enchanted
 Glides the Celestial Swan, and in your bitter
 Darkness the She-Bear shambles round the Pole;
 Anvils of summer, in mine, the iron ranges

Rise from its arid heart to see the haunted
 River of Light unroll
 Towards Achernar, where Hermes the transmitter
 Of spirits, herald of men and gods, has granted
 Speech between soul and soul,
 And each to each the Swan and Phoenix glitter.

The mortal hearts of poets first engender
 The parleying of those immortal creatures;
 Then from their interchange create unending
 Orbits of song and colloquies of light. . . .

Accept the incantation of this verse;
 Read its plain words; diving the secret message
 By which the dance itself reveals a notion
 That moves our universe.
 In the star rising or the lost leaf falling
 The life of poetry, this enchanted motion,
 Perpetually recurs.
 Take, then, this homage of our craft and calling!

THE FACT THAT we can locate so many points of contact between Canadian and other Commonwealth literatures indicates the possible existence of meaningful parallels between them. There are parallels among topics and ideas; political issues, ethical questions, and problems related to the motivation of human behaviour, for example, all transcend national boundaries. There are parallels that derive from particular literary associations, and from the changing patterns of taste and style. When the contemporary Australian poet Michael Dransfield writes "I'm the ghost haunting an old house, my poems are posthumous",⁸ it is impossible not to be reminded of fragments from the second book of bp nichol's *The Martyrology*:

stein did say
 the hardest thing is making the present continuous
 living day to day

 i want to explain
 as composition does
 only this present moment

COMMONWEALTH RESPONSES

now actually past
.....
knowing the words are i am

this moment is
everything present & tense
i write despite my own misgivings
say things as they do occur
the mind moves truly
is it free
nothing's free of presence
others pressing in
your friends assert themselves as loving you are tortured with
gradually you learn to enjoy

thus you write a history

And there are parallels in time; one effect of mass media communication has been to synchronize countries in disparate time zones, to make knowledge of an event anywhere in the world an almost instantaneous occurrence elsewhere. In a looser way, one can see shifts from colonial to national sensibilities occurring with approximate contemporaneity — for the “Old” Commonwealth at the end of the nineteenth century, and for the “New” one in the middle of the twentieth. And one can seek an instructive relationship between the attitudes and concerns of the European-centred societies and those of the Third World with their acknowledgment of radically different traditions. When in separate studies Claude Bissell and John Matthews have examined the “common ancestry” of Canada and Australia, the “problems that were basically similar, even though they often worked out solutions that were startlingly different”,⁴ they acknowledge the literary perspective one can gain from such comparative study. A familiarity with literary history and with the crosscurrents of literary thought can modify not only our understanding of past accomplishments but also our estimation and interpretation of the present. As the New Zealand poet and critic Kendrick Smithyman puts it somewhat later:

Aware of our openness to influence [today], we are . . . inclined to think of earlier phases as significantly non-involved or independent. . . . If there was . . . a transcending sense of being a colonial, then it gained strength from direct connection with other colonials, fellows of an expansive, and not just North American, New

World. If likeness between physical situations was credible, so too were credible likenesses of social situation and social problems, particularly when like aspirations were in play. . . . Influencing under such conditions was not simply 'being influenced', but an affair of participation, of exchange. . . . The commonwealth of commonwealth literature has a good deal more to be explored.⁵

It would be dangerous, however, after finding recurrent sensibilities, after noting opportunities for influence and actualities of response, after tracing historical ties and cultural parallels, to assume that the Commonwealth has produced a coherent community of literary artists or to affirm the existence of a single "Commonwealth Literature". The points of contact allow certain overlap; even more strongly — as critics like Matthews, George Whalley, and R. E. Watters⁶ have variously noted — they emphasize the extent to which differing environments encourage artists to develop along different lines, to invigorate the English language with their own society's rhythms, images, and connotations, to cast universal humanity into particular social moulds, to draw upon local and specific truths for the concrete realization of their vision.

At best such a process would prove a genuinely creative endeavour, at once documenting the empirical realities of a region and illuminating the recurrent mental, emotional, and spiritual dilemmas of mankind. But the pressure to separate these literary functions is strong, particularly in newer literatures, where, as Balachandra Rajan notes, writer and committed citizen are one and the same, and the temptation exists to devise a work of art that will yield primarily to the social historian. Rajan distinguishes pointedly between such commitment to nationality, or what he calls "the establishing of a collective myth or image", and a concern for identity, "the process of creative self-realization" to which every true artist is necessarily dedicated. He writes:

A sense of nationality can grow out of the discovery of identity and it is important that this should happen frequently, if one is to establish a tradition that is both distinctive and rooted. But while identities may cohere into a nationality, that emerging myth or image should not be used as a frame within which the artist is obliged to discover himself, or by which the value of his discovery is to be judged.⁷

Professor Carl Klinck alludes to a similar distinction when in his "Introduction" to the *Literary History of Canada*, he distinguishes between "whatever is native, or has been naturalized, or has a direct bearing upon the native" and "a chauvinistic hunt for 'Canadianism' ". The latter, which he rejects, would limit the freedom from national boundaries that art implicitly enjoys; the former, to which his

work has been dedicated, seeks that "studied knowledge of ourselves and of our own ways" without which neither artist nor critic can satisfactorily render the truths of experience.

In noting how individual writers exert their characteristic will upon the influences that bear upon them, we see the process of "creative self-realization" in action. To the extent that they participate in any given culture, they communicate the basic attitudes and assumptions that inform that culture's traditions; to the extent that they commit themselves also to the reality of their private vision, such traditions become transcended, transformed, and re-created in the fabrication of each new work of art. The relation between Canadian and other Commonwealth writing offers us one arena in which to seek that triumph of artistry: finding it is what engages and continually electrifies us as readers of literature.

NOTES

- ¹ "Ten Years' Sentences," *Canadian Literature*, no. 41 (Summer, 1969), 13.
- ² "Tradition and the West Indian Novel," *Tradition the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon, 1967), 34.
- ³ Quoted in Thomas W. Shapcott, ed., *Australian Poetry Now* (Melbourne: Sun, 1970), 203.
- ⁴ Claude Bissell, "A Common Ancestry: Literature in Australia and Canada," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXV, no. 2 (January 1956), 142; cf. J. P. Matthews, *Tradition in Exile* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1962).
- ⁵ "The Common Experience, the Common Response," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, VI (June 1971), 17-18.
- ⁶ George Whalley, "Celebration and Elegy in New Zealand Verse," *Queens Quarterly*, LXXIV (1967), 738-753; R. E. Watters, "Original Relations," *Canadian Literature*, no. 7 (Winter, 1961), 6-17, and "A Quest for National Identity," *Proceedings of the 3rd Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 224-241.
- ⁷ "Identity and Nationality," in John Press, ed., *Commonwealth Literature* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1965), 106.