

THE FIRST EXILE

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R. P. BLACKMUR SAID that the hero of the most ambitious art of our time was the artist himself. And the novel of the artist is one of the fundamental indices in an assessment of a given culture's maturity, self-consciousness and sophistication, because it is a work of the imagination, whose subject is the imagination. In Canada, the genre has come into its own in the work of Hugh Hood and Mordecai Richler, much of which deals with artist protagonists like Alexander MacDonald, Rose Leclair, Jake Hersh, or Norman Price. And it was inaugurated in the nineteenth century novel of Sara Jeannette Duncan, *A Daughter of Today*, whose story of the development of a young, sensitive, artistic imagination exiled abroad began the tradition.

At the outset, Elfrida Bell, the artist heroine, returns to Sparta, her small, drab Ontario hometown, after one year of art courses in Philadelphia. Her basic training in the arts has been undergone outside Canada. She has exiled herself to the United States before continuing the process in Europe as most Canadian artist heroes will, and there she sets a trend.

Her intellectual allegiances are instinctively European. As an artist and an intellect, S. J. Duncan's heroine has gained access to the universe lying beyond Sparta, a small entropic semi-urban microcosm like those which are the setting of Stephen Leacock's and Robertson Davies' novels and stories; her dream is the great dream of the Canadian intelligentsia, the preservation of vital lifelines to the "mother" countries of France and England during the long-drawn absence of an indigenous cultural life.

When she quits her home town, the girl undergoes a change not of degree, but of kind. The idiom of behaviour, the system of values she adopts, is unintelligible to a home environment which really has neither and which lives in the inertia of acquired habit. Exile for her is an initiation into a world which has a sense of manners:

... manners in the slightly extended sense of the gestures and modes of behaviour established by a society for the expression of moral attitudes.¹

The declining nineteenth century was the golden age of the artist as magnificent egotist, entrenched in Bohemia which, according to Alphonse de Callonne, was bordered on the north by need, on the south by misery, on the east by illusion and on the west by the infirmary. Elfrida will become an initiate of the Decadence, whose manners and conventions have become *mantras*, rituals for inducing the creative state, like the rotten apples of Schiller's work desk.

But before she leaves her native society the provincial's egotism still bears the stamp of the order against which it would rebel. It lacks scope, because it never defies institutions or the corporate egos of social class or native country, and it lacks the radical articulateness which is the earmark of the true rebel. At home, Elfrida Bell is a domesticated rebel in a domestic environment which lives on mood rather than principle and seldom deals with anything but the petty quarrels of petty minds. She keeps a relatively low profile, since language, in Sparta, has not evolved beyond the bare immediacy of daily fact. The artist's native environment is only the background against which her self-conscious coquettishness stands out, a mirror in which she can fawn on her own image.

Her actual and her ideal self, her most mysterious and interesting self, had originated in the air and the opportunities of Sparta. Sparta had even done her the service of showing her that she was unusual by contrast, and Elfrida felt that she ought to be thankful to somebody or something for being unusual as she was.

When she adopts the code of the Bohemian, Elfrida does so with a complacent exaltation which may or may not be shared by the writer, whose use of tone is surprisingly uncertain.

She entered the new world [of the Quartier Latin] with proud recognition of its unwritten laws, its unsanctified morale, its rictious overflowing ideals; and she was instant in gathering that to see, to comprehend these was to be thrice blessed, as not to see, not to comprehend them was to dwell in outer darkness with the bourgeois and the 'sandpaper' artists and others who are without hope.

Of course the passage is absurd overstatement.

As Gerald Jay Goldberg noted in his unpublished study of the artist hero in English fiction:

If one were to evaluate degrees of estrangement, residence in Bohemia, in spite of its extravagance, ... is often but a phase in the artist's development, and in the

instances in which success is achieved, the Bohemian is reabsorbed into the social structure.²

For Elfrida, success is not achieved and she leads a resolutely marginal and half delinquent existence, perhaps because, as James said, the artist hero can only be the failed artist whose misfortunes lend themselves to dramatization more readily than the largely intractable process of outstanding artistic creation. Provincial bondage still governs her existence through the Dickensian menace of ruin at home and the cutting off of allowances to those who would leave their little outpost of empire. When S. J. Duncan shows Elfrida's parents living on a reduced income so that Elfrida must drop her painting and go job hunting as an inexperienced journalist, she is being very Canadian. Robertson Davies builds his macabre comedy of the expatriate on the dialectics of money and the artist. In Hugh Hood's *White Figure, White Ground* the hero's father undergoes near ruin. In Morley Callaghan's *A Passion in Rome*, Sam Raymond may or may not be paid while on an assignment in Rome as a journalist. The economic fortunes of home and family always affect the life of the vagrant artist. Money, a stable medium of exchange, seems to strike his imagination. He feels scruples over having too much of it in Robertson Davies' *A Mixture of Frailties*, he hates the tentacular presence of usury in Scott Symons' *Place d'Armes*. He is never deeply indifferent to it as Joyce Cary's vintage hobo Gulley Jimson is, although he pays lip service to the economics of irreverence and the conventions of garret life. Extrinsic criteria, the necessities of survival, influence his choice of a medium more directly than his particular brand of aesthetic sensibility which is more often than not undefined and purely potential.

Elfrida evolves into more of a radical libertarian, though less of an artist, than most of her successors. Her career as a writer is initiated by her parents' economic difficulties, and although she has been an indifferent painter, she makes it a point to pause in awkward reverence on the threshold of a new life. A daughter of the age, she would no doubt agree with Wilde speaking to André Gide in *Blidah* and confiding that "il faut toujours vouloir ce qui est le plus tragique." She insists on being risqué and very much the aesthete while writing unprintable articles on "the nemesis of romanticism", which are universally rejected. She prefers theory to craftsmanship. When the artist Kendal draws a satirical sketch of her paying her respects to George Jasper, novelist, and kissing Jasper's hand, he puts the mirror up to nature, thanks to the techniques which Elfrida didn't care to master. The irony is in the subject of the sketch, but also in the medium

used by the painter. The artist's capacity to satirize, to act upon a value judgement by producing an image, helps him settle his accounts with the outside world and resume his relationship with the men and things about him.

... Kendal felt free to make the most of his opportunities of seeing Elfrida — his irritation with her subsided, her blunder had been settled to his satisfaction. He had an obscure idea of giving the incident form and colour upon canvas, in arresting its true *motif* with a pictorial tongue.

Yet through it he remains self-critical:

It was his conception of the girl that he punished and he let his fascinated speculation go out to her afterward at a redoubled rate.

Kendal's affinities to the artistic thought and practice of the 1890's are not very well defined. He is a competent young trained technician over whom academicians are atwitter in corporate distress. He produces intelligible formal signs, especially portraits, and gives shape to the continuous flow of the real. Proper handling of his medium requires at least the altruism of the craftsman who must achieve control.

On the other hand the dandyism which is Elfrida's private morality distorts her relationship with those surrounding her since she considers herself her own artistic medium and tends to indulge in gesture for gesture's sake. Her scrupulous concern over her own sensibility makes her blind to those of others. She selects sensations as a painter would select pigments

She was so freshly impressed with the new lifelights, curious, tawdry, fascinating, revolting, above all sharp and undisguised, of the world she had felt, that she saw them already projected with a verisimilitude which, if she had possessed the art of it, would have made her indeed famous. Her own power of realisation assured her on this point — nobody could see, not divine but *see*, as she did, without being able to reproduce; the one implied the other... and up from the bag came a scent that made her shut her eyes and laugh with its power to bring her experiences back to her.

From such a point of view, the artistic temperament is endowed with a more lively sensibility than is supposed to be common among mankind. The artist also grants himself the right to use the beings who serve as models for his own private purposes, robbing them of their identity by making them into the public images which are the product of his art. Callaghan in *A Passion in Rome* suggests that Michelangelo sees his contemporaries not as individuals but "as something for form and colour". Hypersensitivity and egotism are very commonplace generali-

inescapable. Murger, who had few illusions on things Bohemian and saw starving in garrets as a silly thing to do, thought the names of Gilbert, Malfilatre, Chatterton and Moreau had been bandied about too often, to the point where the cult addressed to them had simply become what he called "the martyrology of the mediocre".⁴ A reader who shares this opinion will wonder whether S. J. Duncan's novel is merely derivative or whether it should be dealt with on its own terms.

The aesthetic of the dandy gives the artist himself the purposeful purposelessness of the artifact because his life *is* his art, which is quite a sophisticated proposition for an author like S. J. Duncan who still belonged to a semi-pioneer society to use in building a novel. The character who operates on this premise performs more than he exists, he abstracts himself from nature and society and stages his existence like a Gidian Lafcadio whose acts have no cause, no usefulness, are done out of pure pleasure. The book in which he is portrayed inevitably acquires a cerebral argumentative quality since it must provide an apology for its hero's motive. It becomes discontinuous because it portrays the spontaneity of gratuitous impulse, the methodical and immediate satisfaction of unreasoned whim. Like its hero, it must carefully and overtly remain untainted with the vulgarity of mere existence. The likes and dislikes of such a hero, his affirmations of belief or his acts, including suicide, also lose the transparency which motivation must have in order to remain intelligible to all. Ultimately, the oracular ambiguity of his words, the complacent grace of his gestures contradict the literary medium of the novel, language. Like the perfect crime, such a being must remain unknown by definition, and therefore cannot exist, or can only exist for himself, a barren divinity.

One could say that Sara Jeanette Duncan's novel of the artist attempted to bring the Canadian literary sensibility from barbarism into decadence single-handedly, somehow bypassing civilization. It was inevitable that subsequent works should push back the clock and not travel through such strange seas of thought en masse. Canada is a country young enough to gamble on that next century which will be, perennially, its very own. It is also a country young enough to share the pre-Romantic faith that

... art, however great, must be subordinate to the greater art of living. It was the faith that persuaded Milton to drop his epic ambitions for politics and Congreve to abandon authorship when he felt it to compromise his integrity as a gentleman; and it is allied to the faith in the social obligation of the artist, whose duty was to serve his public.⁵

NOTES

- ¹ Dick Harrison, "The American Adam and the Canadian Christ", *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Los Angeles, Calif.: July 1970), p. 161.
- ² Gerald Jay Goldberg, "The Artist Hero in British Fiction", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1958, p. 221.
- ³ Robertson Davies, *A Mixture of Frailties*, p. 137.
- ⁴ Joanna Richardson, "Romantic Bohemia", in *History Today*, July 1969.
- ⁵ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Epic Strain in the English Novel* (New Jersey: Essential Books Inc., 1958), p. 71.

