NOTES ON THE CANADIAN IMAGINATION

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WHILE IT IS THE SPECIAL FUNCTION of the imagination to make us more fully aware of life's potentialities, the Canadian imagination has traditionally been obsessed with the limitations rather than the possibilities of human experience. The imagination allows us momentarily to see the world differently, shaped not by economics and politics, but in accordance with man's deepest anxieties and wishes. Most positively it gives us a glimpse of life lived with a sense of greater freedom and a fully expressed individuality, for at the centre of every imaginative response, buried however deeply, is a vision of human existence liberated erotically. Canadian art, however, seldom directs us to the fulfilment of this vision; rather it accepts life's limitations and finds ascetic pleasure within their circumference.

Part of the reason for this, we must assume, is climate and geography, for these have historically made survival rather than freedom the great fact of Canadian life. The contrast to the American experience is suggestive. Men went to the United States seeking freedom and the opportunity for unlimited individual power; they sought to re-capture that Renaissance condition where each man was potentially able to realize his broadest ambitions. This vision was reinforced by the unlimited physical frontier. Though much of the United States is geographically and climatically as forbidding as Canada, the American imagination has always responded to the idea of America as a geographical whole and has not been limited to the intemperate conditions of one region. With its Mississippi winding into the warm South, and the Western plains sweeping across to the mountains and the promise of California, the American landscape has always provided an escape route from the specific limitations of "home"; and American

art has received its special character from this dynamic urge to growth and unceasing condition of movement. In Canada there is little comparable movement possible; Canadians may journey thousands of miles within their country but they remain physically in the north.

Men came to Canada for very different reasons. Where they had gone to the United States to escape tradition and build individual empires, they came to Canada seeking a place in which to preserve those traditions threatened at home. The United Empire Loyalists who settled in the Maritimes were largely educated, conservative men who had not joined in the Revolutionary cause and who sought a haven in Canada for their way of life and their values. In less obvious fashion the same was true of many of the settlers who came from England in the nineteenth-century seeking an economic and social preserve. Rather than suffer the eroding effects of increasing poverty in England, large numbers of middle-class English and Scots (the "genteel" poor) came to Canada where through better economic opportunities their station in life might be saved. The Strickland family is a typical as well as significant example. Imaginatively Canada has not been conceived of as a land of opportunity so much as a refuge from aggressive or debilitating forces elsewhere. The French response to Canada has been similar to the English, symbolized dramatically in the fortress city of Quebec — the refuge on the rock. Much less even than the English have French-Canadians had the desire to explore and expand over the continent. The Canadian winter is a fact formidable to French and English alike.

A sense of limitations, then, both physical and emotional, has determined the character of the Canadian imagination from the outset. Northrop Frye has designated this our "garrison mentality", referring specifically to the Canadian preference for staying at home rather than "lighting out for the territory". This response to the Canadian landscape — the reluctance to set forth, the holding fast to what is known and safe — makes it possible to define a tradition in Canadian art. It is a quality of response which on its outer limits suggests fear, but at its core makes us cherish what is domestic and secure, however humble and small. It finds its essential expression in such varied works of the imagination as Susanna Moodie's journals, the sonnets of Archibald Lampman, the painting of Ozias Leduc, F. P. Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*, the music of Claude Champagne, Ross's *As For Me and My House* or the Manitoba novels of Gabrielle Roy. In Mrs. Moodie's journals it is an emotion not yet transformed into art; in the work of subsequent artists it not only defines the content of their art but also the very style by which expression is achieved.

TWO IMAGES dominate Canadian art. Not surprisingly one of these is nature in both its foreboding and its bleak aspects. A sense of nature's turbulence and destructive power is visually striking in such paintings as Tom Thomson's "Approaching Storm" and F. H. Varley's "The Elements", and is dramatically central to such fiction as *Maria Chapdelaine*, Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, Sinclair Ross's "The Lamp at Noon"; its latent hostility is a felt presence in the grim winter lyrics of Wilfred Campbell and Margaret Avison. Similarly the unrelieved bleakness of the northern landscape — the snow-covered expanses, the grey wintry sky — is an integral part of Canadian art. A heavy melancholy broods over the landscapes of A. Y. Jackson; it assumes a delicate, refined form of sadness in the canvases of J. W. Morrice (see for example "The Woodpile"), and wears a grim, stoical mask in the Arctic landscapes of Lawren Harris. The latter have been interpreted musically by Harry Freedman in his *Images* with a similar feeling of oppressive gloom. The imprisoning monotony of the landscape weighs heavily on Mrs. Moodie and on the characters in Ross's *As For Me and My House*, and is part of that sadness felt by the poets of Tantramar and Grand Pré. It would seem then that the landscape, harsh or bleak, is the cause of the artist's isolation and loneliness; Northrop Frye implies this in all his writing about Canadian art. Yet surely this is to belie the most fundamental observation we can make about the nature of the imagination: namely, that its very existence derives in a profound way from the artist's sense of alienation from his fellow man. From the troubadour onwards the artist has been traditionally identified as an outsider. The artist's struggle is never really with nature, but with his own divided self and with the society from which he is separate. In the tradition of Romantic art the physical landscape in Canada becomes a projection of the artist's isolation, an objective correlative for his experience of fear, sadness and the challenge to endure.

The other recurrent image is that of the humble dwelling, the human refuge from the austere landscape and the elements. The simple cottage hearth redolent of warmth and domestic security is at the emotional centre of much Canadian art. The cottage with wife and child assures McCulloch's Stepsure that his conservative way of life is best; it awaits Grove at the end of each journey over "prairie trails". The little dwelling huddled on the landscape is almost a convention in the painting of the Group of Seven. Again a dialectic would appear to exist between the human presence and the desolate indifference of nature (certainly these two forces do define each other), but it is not so simple, for that

image of the humble cottage is essentially a pastoral and escapist one. It does not represent the true arena of the artist's endeavour, for he is neither explorer nor pioneer. His struggle is not with a stubborn wilderness, but with the complex tangles of human emotions.

No genuine imaginative conflict exists then between man and nature in Canadian art; rather the conflict is between the artist and a force which most frequently lies outside the circumference of his art. Those two images which would appear in conflict — the austere landscape and the small abode — are both projections of the artist's sense of isolation and his desire to retreat from the larger world. This is evident in the style of A. Y. Jackson's paintings where the wavy lines of structure enclose both buildings and landscape in soft, unifying folds. Similarly the imaginative tension in *Over Prairie Trails* derives not from a conflict between the narrator and the forces of nature on his rides (indeed his delight in the weather and his keen observations of the landscape and the seasons are one with his delight in seeing wife and child again), but from a source of anxiety seldom referred to by the narrator — his ambition and his frustration in society. Much of his pleasure on the trails seems to lie in his escaping the unsatisfactory world of his school and teaching, perhaps in retreating from the world as a whole which rejected the once hopeful young artist. Like the English Romantic writers (particularly Wordsworth, who greatly influenced the Confederation poets) many Canadian artists have sought to escape the fretful world of the city and "the sneer of vain and selfish men". Tom Thomson and several of the Group of Seven went on long expeditions into the northern woods to work; Emily Carr journeyed hundreds of miles up the British Columbia coast and found companionship with the Indians whose villages she painted. They all sought a simpler, more primitive world in which to work, a pastoral retreat from the painful complexities of contemporary society. The growth of a Canadian musical identity was similarly fostered in the 1920's by the rediscovery of the folk song; it is an integral part of the music of Canada's most accomplished composers including Hector Gatton, Sir Ernest MacMillan and particularly Claude Champagne.

The quest for pastoral retreat, however, renders Canadian art non-dramatic, for the source of conflict remains outside the canvas or just off the page. The wooded landscape with its cottage, the Indian village or the folk song, do not describe the artist's struggle but his retreat; the imaginative drama is often only implied by the nature or mood of his withdrawal. In a country where physical survival has been the foremost reality, men of necessity have controlled rather

than expanded their emotions and the highly dramatic has always struck a false note in Canadian art (e.g. Grove's prairie farmers assuming Shakespearian gestures). Perhaps this is why there has traditionally been so little Canadian theatre. The expenditure of human energy in emotional conflict has never been conducive to the survival of the garrison.

In this light Susanna Moodie's pioneer journals can be seen as embodying the raw materials out of which the Canadian imagination has taken shape. When Mrs. Moodie and her family came to Canada in the 1830's (to salvage their dwindling fortunes and social dignity), Ontario was crude bush country and survival foremost in the minds of even its most educated English settlers. The image of nature as a hostile force recurs frequently throughout the journals; wild animals, fire, bitter cold, destructive rains take up much of the day to day concerns of the journals. The log house — the humble dwelling in the backwoods — evolves accordingly as an emblem of refuge from these threatening forces. But physical survival does not comprehend the full drama of Mrs. Moodie's journals. Her first emotion on reaching Canada is homesickness for England, but that emotion is soon qualified by a sense of having been rejected by the "mother country", and she views Canada with gratitude for giving her family a second chance. The scene along the St. Lawrence suggests to her "a second Eden", and her first steps ashore lead to a quiet copse by a little river, sheltered away from the crowds. But Canada with its rough, commonplace inhabitants is socially no more of a solace than England. Mrs. Moodie's pride alienates her from her crude neighbours, and only in the isolation of the backwoods, despite all its physical hardships, can she find respite. Mrs. Moodie ultimately sings praise of her home in Canada, but her eulogy begins significantly after she has discovered the wilderness to be not her antagonist, but the harsh companion of her loneliness. Mrs. Moodie's personal drama of rejection and exile, and her search for an emotional refuge from an uncaring world is very central to what is imaginative in the Canadian experience.

NORTHROP FRYE points to a distinctively Canadian poetry developing in the long narrative poem rather than in the brief lyric. The poets in this tradition trace their descent down through Heavysege, Mair, Isabella Crawford, D. C. Scott, Pratt and Birney. For Frye the experience which these poets share and which welds them into a continuous and distinctly Canadian tradition is that sense of God's disappearance and of man's being left alone to

face an indifferent, if not hostile, nature in a primitive country. This vision is central to the narrative conflict from Heavysege's wolf, howling in answer to Jephthah's prayer, to the "sun and incurious clouds" which alone mark the destruction of Birney's David. But the question here is whether these poems in which man does battle with nature are genuinely dramatic. If we understand "dramatic" to mean conflict whose ultimate goal is erotic liberation (Frye himself assumes this definition in his classic study of Blake), then the struggle with nature as an external force is no more dramatic than the escape into nature for refuge from man.

Of the early narrative poets only Isabella Valancy Crawford realizes something uniquely imaginative in her verse. The matrix of her poems is the rhetoric of nineteenth-century romanticism with its sentimental philosophical assumptions, and yet there is a vigour and a virile incisiveness in her style (most striking in individual images and phrases such as "the small ponds pouted up their silver lips" or "to the feast / They flocked with the beaks of unclean crows") which renders that rhetoric the perfect vehicle for her imagination. For Miss Crawford clearly did not seek in her verse to devalue the romantic myths of the nineteenth-century; rather she sought within their framework to release into expression an essentially masculine energy and temperament. In almost all of her poems Miss Crawford's narrator is a lonely male figure (in suitable accordance with literary convention) whose love can never be fulfilled. However, it is difficult to describe Miss Crawford's narrative poems as fully dramatic; "Malcolm's Katie" is essentially an idyll — a kind of fairy tale poem — in which against great odds the much beleaguered hero wins his true love, while "Old Spookses' Pass" is a dialect cowboy poem describing a stampede of cattle in the Rocky Mountains.

Duncan Campbell Scott, whose imagination is almost solely preoccupied with death, dramatizes his obsession entirely in terms of an external struggle with nature. Scott's narratives are technically among the most sophisticated of Canadian poems; in the juxtaposition of brief, simple scenes the narratives move swiftly and relentlessly to their inevitable conclusions, the ruthlessly selective style being a consummate expression of the implacable emotion in the poems. In "At the Cedars", the log jam which breaks free takes with it, in a few short stanzas, the lives of the young man and of the girl who rushes after him in a canoe. In "The Forsaken", Scott juxtaposes the young Indian mother, sacrificing her own flesh to obtain food for her child, with the scene many years later in which her grandchildren leave her an old woman to die in the snow. There is a precision in the delineating of emotion and a foreboding sense of inevitable

doom in Scott's poetry, and yet Scott evades a genuine dramatic conflict in his narratives. The protagonists in his poems are always primitives — whether Indians or simple French-Canadian habitants — whose grim fates, while embodying Scott's fatalistic vision, belong essentially to the world of folk literature rather than imaginative drama.

The narrative poems of E. J. Pratt similarly evade dramatic conflict. Pratt adopts what is essentially the existentialist viewpoint so fashionable in the first half of the twentieth century (focussing on the desertion of man by God), and whether he is describing the missionaries among the Indians or modern trans-Atlantic travel, man is seen pitted against the indifferent and destructive force of nature. Pratt's imagination is most fully engaged with those stark, primordial forms of nature which threaten to overwhelm man — the paleolithic iceberg, the pitiless savages, the shark, the granite cliffs of the bleak landscape on which man continues to endure. This stoical imagination finds its fullest expression not in dramatic narrative but in descriptive verse (particularly the Newfoundland poems) which renders in a slow, sculptural style the felt experience of life's intractable hardness. Even the long narrative poems are essentially a kind of plastic art, like monumental friezes whose epic gestures engage our attention not by means of action but through a kind of carved verbal strength.

In Earle Birney's "David", the narrative tradition takes a different turn; the youth in Birney's poem is crippled by his fall in the mountains, but the drama lies not in a betrayal of David by nature, but in his appeal to the narrator to push him over the cliff's edge to his death. True, we are told that only "the sun and incurious clouds" mark the place where David's body is found, but our involvement does not come to rest on that image of an indifferent landscape, but on the narrator's reflection that it was "the last of my youth". Birney, however, has not given us another narrative poem as fine as "David", so that the narrative tradition in Canadian poetry has not yet blossomed into a fully dramatic art.

LYRIC POETRY can be as dramatic as narrative verse, for the imaginative conflict which makes art dramatic is never a matter of content but of style. Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" for example is a "dramatic" poem, for it is woven out of images of longed-for childish innocence in conflict with the conceptualized arguments of a rational and sobered adult. Similarly the rich sensuous vein of Keats's style is heightened dramatically by the logic of awareness upon which his poems are structured. The reference here to the English

poets is not entirely arbitrary, for it is the rhetoric of the great "Romantic" writers that we hear once again when we turn to the Canadian poets of Confederation. I use the term *rhetoric* because English Romanticism assumed a way of viewing and talking about nature that became a kind of convention of response. Generally speaking, Romanticism, after the failure of eighteenth-century rationalism, relocated man's hopes for a more humane and satisfying existence in a benevolent, organic view of nature and the individual's correspondent emotion thereto. This shift in popular philosophical assumptions was to provide the conventions for a non-dramatic mode of art — the retreat into a pastoral and wholly narcissistic world from which all conflict is excluded. Only those artists who could never entirely escape society, whose retreats turned into self-confrontation rather than self-love, continue to engage our interest today.

The degree of interest in Canada's "Confederation" poets will be determined by the extent to which the Romantic conventions have been transformed by the poet's individual style. In the poetry of Charles G. D. Roberts, Bliss Carman and Archibald Lampman the conventions of Romanticism are all too obviously in evidence — the retreat into nature, the sense of irreparable loss in time, the confusing sadness in response to nature's beauty, the world of dreams as somehow preferable to reality. This is the world of Roberts' Tantramar and Carman's Grand Pré, and of almost all of Lampman's verse. Each of these three poets has his own distinctive way of looking at nature: for Roberts nature is an image of the maternal, but an image bereft of comfort and pervaded rather with the sadness of something lost and irretrievable; Carman's poetry is similarly elegiac except that each poem is structured around a peak moment of erotic ecstasy which can never be recaptured; in Lampman's poems nature is the bridge which leads the poet away from social reality into the more secure and satisfying world of dreams. But in each case these are distinctions in subject matter rather than in style. If the work of any of these poets has genuine stylistic distinction it is the sonnet of Archibald Lampman. Within this compact and highly structured poetic form, Lampman was able to distil the emotion attendant on his retreat into nature and his surrender to dreams. By means of exclusively visual description each sonnet moves to a desired point of complete stasis in the dream image. There is a painterly quality in these sonnets not only in the visual imagery but also in the constant use of colour; the details of a landscape are sketched in as if with a painter's brush, giving the sense of an achieved stillness in place and time. "In November", "A Sunset at Les Eboulements" and "Winter Evening" are particularly fine examples of Lampman's sonnet in which the style renders per-

fectly that state of total passivity desired by the poet. Yet it is not possible to call Lampman's poetry dramatic in the sense I am applying the term here. Conflict has been eliminated from the poems; a persistent sense of melancholy and failure underlie the urge to withdraw into the dreamy pastoral setting, but it is only there by implication, never as an actual fact with which to contend. Society is seen as a hostile and threatening force (to a devastating degree in "The City of the End of Things") and nature correspondingly is a place of refuge, an image of what is tranquil and secure; but both images constitute an evasion of an internal struggle such that Lampman's poetry is not truly dramatic. One might describe the lyrics of Canada's Confederation poets as songs of innocence.

The other significant lyricist among Canada's early poets is the youthful genius from Quebec, Emile Nelligan, who went mad before he was twenty. Curiously Nelligan too might be said to sing songs of innocence: songs of a soul "candide", of the garden of childhood, of a mother gone to be with the saints. But rather than finding consolation in a view of nature as correspondingly innocent, Nelligan despairs of ever re-achieving that blessed, primal state and his lament for a lost childhood swiftly becomes either a narcotic drug or an exhortation to self-destruction. In "Le Vaisseau d'Or" the poet likens himself in his innocence to a golden ship which is wracked by the storms of experience and broken open to reveal a cargo of disgust, hate and neurosis; the devastated ship sinks into a coffin of dreams in the abyss. In "La Romance du Vin" the simulated gaiety of a May song rises in a reckless kind of crescendo to conclude in an outburst of sobbing. The style of Nelligan's poetry is a vivid embodying of his desperate emotions: there are all the delicate verbal nuances of the symbolist poet as he describes the attenuated state of the pure and innocent soul; there is the rush of hypnotic rhythms as the poem plunges headlong through despair into oblivion. A kind of dramatic rhythm exists to Nelligan's poetry as a whole and yet it is an essentially limited drama, for despair is not really the contrary of innocence.

THE FICTIONAL COUNTERPART of the lyric poem is the novel of childhood memories. The recapturing of childhood in an aesthetic form belongs to the pastoral mode wherein the creative imagination, finding present existence unsatisfactory, goes back into the past in quest of a more perfect world — something once experienced but now lost. In recovering lost time the imagination may seek to relive vicariously those earliest experiences in order to discover what has made the present so meaningless, or it may romanticize the past

so that childhood remains the perfectly ordered world, a happy refuge from the chaos of the present. Such great American pastoral novelists as Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner ultimately expose the past for the outrage it has committed on the present and attempt to free themselves from the bond of memory; beneath the golden haze of nostalgia is revealed the painful experience of rejection and failure. The Canadian artist, however, in a land so fraught with limitations, appears to despair of freedom in the present and in order to guarantee a safe, protected place idealizes the past in a consistently nostalgic art.

Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* are two of the most evocative novels written in this mode. In Buckler's novel the central figure, David Canaan, is plagued by a sense of family guilt and by his being different from other men; but unlike his American fictional counterparts he does not leave the family home, but remains there the rest of his life. His death in the blanketing snowfall culminates a series of images throughout the book wherein the protagonist's emotional preference is for the safe, protected place at home rather than the movement forward of experience in time. The emotional quest in Mitchell's novel of childhood memories is to understand a "feeling" that overwhelmed him as a boy. To the fictional protagonist, Brian O'Connal, it comes variously in the form of ecstatic wonder at the contemplation of a dewdrop on a spiræ leaf or in the form of revulsion at the sight of a dead, two-headed calf. Above all it is a heightened sense of something incomplete, something not achieved. The crucial experience of failure for Brian is in his not being able to feel anything when his father dies; significantly his father's illness and death follow immediately upon the boy's initiation into sexual knowledge which he violently refuses to accept. After this point the feeling never comes again for, as the sympathetic school-master suggests, in reflecting on Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode", that feeling was innocence.

Aesthetically nostalgia effects a compromise between the emotional longing to go back to the past and the conscious recognition that it is neither possible nor ultimately desirable to do so. Through the various strategies of style the artist is able to indulge in his fantasy of recapturing the past, while at the same time, through the very conventions of art, he tacitly concedes that in actuality it is impossible. Buckler and Mitchell heighten the sense of loss integral to nostalgia by making us keenly aware of the passing of time; but in her memory book, *Street of Riches*, Gabrielle Roy eliminates perspectives to such an extent that a sense of joy in recapturing childhood pervades the book throughout. Although

passage of time does underlie the structural arrangement of the stories (the narrator is a small child at the beginning and a teacher with her first school at the close), it plays no casual role within the stories themselves or in their relationship to each other. It is the timeless world of childhood — an eternal summer — that the author has captured in these lyrical and beautifully-wrought vignettes of the past. *Street of Riches* closes with a very moving image of innocent refuge — that of the little schoolroom with its happy children and the narrator-teacher snugly protected against the snowstorm sweeping down over the prairie. Throughout the book the narrator remembers her attic bedroom which is significantly both a retreat from the world (for her self dramatized as "Petite Misère") and a place where her imagination comes fully alive. (It is from the attic room that she hears the "voices of the pools" and dedicates herself to becoming a writer.) In the final chapter, "To Earn My Living...", the narrator must go out into the world to work, but as a teacher she happily finds herself "as though cut off from the rest of the world in [the] warm little schoolhouse". She reflects at the book's close: "I was living through one of the rarest happinesses of my life. Was not all the world a child? Were we not at the day's morning? . . . "

Gabrielle Roy, however, did not sing only the songs of innocence from her past; the four stories in *The Road past Altamont*, her songs of experience, are bound together by their obsession with the passage of time, with life's mutability and with the failure of human relationships. This darker dimension to the past, imaged successively in the dying grandmother, the kindly old neighbour, Monsieur Saint-Hilaire, and the "move" of the poor family, has its final focus in the anxiety the narrator feels in relation to her mother, a muted though nonetheless urgent preoccupation in *Street of Riches* as well. In the concluding section, titled "The Road Past Altamont", the narrator examines her guilty feelings about leaving her mother and in so doing discovers the motives of her art in her desire to compensate her mother for all of life's failures and disappointments. There is a profound sadness, however, at the end of this book, for the understanding and the tribute have come too late — art can never replenish life. Though the final section of *The Road past Altamont* is essentially non-dramatic, reflective writing, it nevertheless embodies a fully dramatic awareness that is rare in the course of Canadian art.

THE IMPACT OF STYLE in the aesthetic response is most obvious in the visual arts. Because the "subject" from life is so readily available to our direct perception and not obfuscated in any way by the medium of language,

we automatically demand certain transformations of the life subject in the work of art. Our expectations are those of style. From the outset Canadian painting, as a visual record of the exploring and settling of a vast, northern wilderness, has had its own unique subject matter in a convention of nature images — brooding mountains, stormy lakes, unrelieved snowscapes and the log cabin or tiny village huddled upon this overwhelming landscape. But in what way, we must ask, has this setting been transformed by the imagination of Canada's artists so that a unique way of looking at the familiar scene emerges? In other words, what in the visual arts constitutes a unique Canadian style?

In the very earliest paintings, as in the earliest Canadian literature, style and subject matter are very much at odds with each other. The early artists were working in a cultural tradition that was English and European. They painted the new country but their style does not reflect an indigenous response to that landscape; rather it was an application of a style evolved in the "old country." The one possible exception is the votive painting from colonial Quebec. Ex-votos were done to fulfil religious vows; their execution was usually motivated by thankfulness for a miraculous rescue from danger. The miraculous event was the subject of the painting; in the lower half of the plaque was pictured the threatened disaster (a shipwreck at sea, a man pinned under a fallen tree) and in the upper part the guarantee of imminent rescue in the form of a saint. Ex-votos were a folk art and part of a European tradition, but the style of these paintings in no way distorted the Canadian scene — it was very adaptable to the rugged landscape. Indeed the simultaneous depiction of both the threatened disaster and the guardian saint presiding over the scene creates a perspective which heightens both the sense of danger and the providential refuge. It may be a simplistic juxtaposition and yet it is one which is continuous as long as Canadian art is representational. For much Canadian painting, like literature, evokes a love for what is known and secure, and transforms the humble details of everyday life so that they radiate something of the warmth and affection with which they are viewed.

The only major artist before the turn of this century to develop a distinctive style was Cornelius Krieghoff. Krieghoff painted different phases of life in rural Quebec and his inn scenes such as "J. B. Jolifou, Aubergiste" and "Merrymaking" are among the most famous pieces of Canadian art. But Krieghoff himself was not from Quebec; like Grove, Krieghoff was European-born and his life was similarly peripatetic. Krieghoff was not painting Quebec from the details of his own life, but from the perspective of an outside observer, a man of the world at

large, who saw Quebec in exclusively happy, idyllic terms. The vision of life which pervades his most famous pieces is one of simple, rustic unity in which any social conflict is purely comic and enlivens the sense of merrymaking and revelry. The rich brown tones, the minute, myriad detail give the paintings the warmth and enchantment of children's book illustrations. They present a world similar to Leacock's Mariposa, "the little town in the sunshine that once we knew," a visual rendering of the emotion of nostalgia.

The Canadian love of the small and the humble finds its quintessential expression in the canvases of the turn-of-the-century recluse, Ozias Leduc. Leduc chose the most humble subjects possible — apples on a plate, onions, a habitant's simple meal lit by candlelight — but with a delicate (almost caressing) brushstroke he lavished an affection on his crude subjects which imparts to them a universal beauty. In the sombre little canvas, "Les Trois Pommes", the apples glow with a mellow light which suggests a mythical transformation of the subject through the style. In literature only Grove's intimate love of nature on his prairie rides approaches the sensitivity and humility expressed in Leduc's art. The small subject lovingly represented appears again in some of the canvases by L. L. Fitzgerald where the discipline of an essentially ascetic style (a rigorous pointillism) can render a little plant with the heightened quality of affection.

In the work of A. Y. Jackson one finds a visual counterpart to the Confederation poets' view of nature as maternal and all-abiding. Jackson's paintings are more literally pictorial than the work of the rest of the Group, yet that one principle of structure, the soft, wavy line, transforms all of Jackson's scenes into a unique aesthetic vision, whether he is painting Quebec, the Prairies or British Columbia. Jackson's style, however, is not dramatic; while man and nature frequently appear together in Jackson's paintings — the small house or little village huddled against the mountains and the snow — the landscape swells and subsides in such a way as to enfold and protect the human settlement rather than threaten destruction. "Winter, Charlevoix County", "Grey Day, Laurentians", "Valley of the Gouffre River", "Houses, St. Urbain", are particularly striking examples of this aspect of Jackson's art. There is no conflict between the expanse of nature and the fragile human dwelling; rather they both reflect the artist's sense of isolation, and his search for solace in the maternal embrace of a landscape and its lonely inhabitants.

The most dramatic of the non-abstract artists is Emily Carr — a remarkable fact in that she was working in the tradition of Post-Impressionism, a movement which had long spent itself. The style of her paintings, like Jackson's, embodies

a quest for unity; the wavy structural lines weave together the lush contours of earth, stumps, evergreens and sky in a vigorous declaration of harmony. The consummate expression of this pastoral vision is in those dark, womb-like interiors of the British Columbia rain forest. But Emily Carr also painted the grotesque figures of the Indian totems — realistically at first (for historical purposes) then expressionistically, as correlatives of her own fierce and indomitable energies. In much of her best work (pieces like "Big Raven," "Zunoqua of the Cat Village," "Nirvana") these two forces come together in a dynamic conflict of styles — the Indian carvings asserting their phallic identity against the unified contours of vegetation and sky. The dialectic of sexual energies, however, never suggests final union or achievement; the fierce insistence on identity creates an art of cruel pastoral.

If one quality, however, is continuous throughout Canadian painting, it is that affection expressed for what is small and plain but rich in detail. It is a quality of style in the intimate, weightless paintings of David Milne, in the fragile landscapes of Jacques de Tonnancour. And in the abstracts of Paul-Emile Borduas it emerges again reminding us of the gentle ruggedness of a Gagnon and the humility of a Leduc.

THE INSTINCTIVE QUEST of the Canadian imagination for pastoral innocence runs directly counter to the critical, self-conscious intentions of much Canadian art. Living in the shadow of two strongly-defined cultures, English and American (not to mention the effect of France on Quebec), Canadian artists have always been highly self-conscious of their cultural limitations and their relative insignificance in the international context. On the one hand this has reinforced the escapist element in Canadian art (the sense of Canada as a refuge from the larger competitive world), but on the other hand it has made Canadian artists very self-critical, anxious to be aware, to understand, to criticize. This is the tradition in Canadian art that we are most likely to point to with pride — a tradition that includes the "naturalist" novels of F. P. Grove, the ironic parables of Morley Callaghan, the abstracts of Lawren Harris, Gabrielle Roy's social novels (*The Tin Flute*, *The Cashier*), Birney's topical poems, the "great Canadian novels" of Hugh MacLennan.

This critical self-consciousness has of course produced the highest flower of Canadian culture, namely the imaginative critical visions of Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan, two writers and thinkers whose reputation and influence

are truly international. Moreover, it has also engendered a widely praised hybrid art form one might call the fictional documentary which bears a definite mark of aesthetic conviction and validity (examples: the descriptive pioneer treatises of Catharine Parr Traill, Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*, the historical Indian paintings of Paul Kane, such Canadian films as Allan King's *Warrendale* and *A Married Couple*, Scott Symon's autobiographical *Place d'Armes*). However, this element of self-consciousness is in many ways inimical to the process of the imagination in creating art. If the function of the imagination, as suggested above, is to explore those potential areas of our experience which must be repressed in the interest of social and physical survival, then this self-conscious urge will restrain the imagination, for it insists on the compromise of communal understanding and acceptance. The individual experience of loneliness and frustration is assuaged by shared philosophical assumptions about life. The result, in its extreme form, has been a great deal of what one refers to as "academic" art in Canada. A number of gifted poets would seem to have been hindered rather than enriched by their intellectual pursuits; one thinks here of university professors such as A. J. M. Smith or Robert Finch, and especially of Jay MacPherson, whose talent has been wholly absorbed in the myth criticism of Northrop Frye. The sustained imaginative energy of an Irving Layton appears the more remarkable in this light. Earle Birney's very rich and lively instinct for verbal sound patterns and rhythms, however, is frequently betrayed in its clever application to a popular philosophical preoccupation or fashionable artistic stance. Similarly E. J. Pratt's imaginative response to the primordial instincts of life is diluted by the lengthy deliberations in his poetry as to the existence of God and man's place in the cosmos.

The most notorious example of the Canadian imagination betrayed by critical self-consciousness is Hugh MacLennan's attempt to forge in his fiction our national identity. The two dominant preoccupations in his novels — his personal struggle for selfhood on the one hand and his public attempt to define the Canadian consciousness on the other — do not relate to each other in a genuine dialectic; rather the public ambition provides an escape from the irresolvable complexities of the personal dilemma. This pattern is constant in all of MacLennan's books. The imaginative core of his writing lies in the father-son relationship which in his first book, *Barometer Rising*, is set forth in the struggle between the young war victim, Neil MacRae, and his tyrannical uncle, Geoffrey Wain. But the drama in the novel is ultimately a false one, for this oedipal conflict is evaded by means of the Halifax harbour explosion; indeed there is never

a confrontation between the antagonists, for the explosion conveniently kills Wain and leaves MacRae free to depart with Wain's daughter. In the last half of the book the Halifax disaster becomes the novel's authentic subject (again the documentary instinct in Canadian art), the external drama in the harbour and, finally, the question of Canada's international identity supplanting the novel's imaginative theme. This preoccupation with national identity reaches embarrassing proportions in *Two Solitudes* and *The Watch That Ends the Night*. *Each Man's Son* is potentially MacLennan's most effective novel for here he returns to the actual landscape of his Cape Breton childhood and the conflict is more genuinely painful because it is confused with feelings of nostalgia; but again the plot is resolved in *deus ex machina* fashion (MacLennan's classicism?) and the novel again has a hollow centre.

Only in Canadian humour is there any effective merging of the critical self-consciousness and the artist's deepest imaginative instinct. In part this is because the comic imagination by its very nature seeks to criticize and provoke awareness through exposure and ridicule. But more important is the fact that satire demands a social norm, a rational point of view against which human folly may be measured, and this automatically precludes a highly personal and eccentric imagination. What is notable in Canadian humour is the unspoken agreement that the viewpoint of the group rather than of the rational individual is best — another manifestation of the "garrison mentality." It is the foolish individual who elicits scorn and ridicule; it is never the whole community that is condemned. Though it may seem that all the individuals in Stepsure's village are subject to ridicule for their self-indulgent behaviour ("my cousin Harrow, Saunders Scantocreesh and a few others excepted"), it is the communal Puritan values of hard work and piety which prevail. Similarly in Leacock's Mariposa or Robertson Davies's Salterton, while the small town is being laughed at, the satirist never questions the values upon which that town's life is based. And in *The Clockmaker* Haliburton very carefully balances Sam Slick's shrewd observations on the Bluenoses with our emotional reaction to Slick as an outsider and a comic figure. Because Canadian humour is thus essentially conservative it is also finally pastoral: the agrarian values by which Stepsure lives are for McCulloch clearly threatened and on the wane; for Leacock the town of Mariposa lies somewhere in the past in our dreams, and for Davies that childish certainty of being at the centre of the world only exists in the Salterton of his memory and imagination and no longer in the small city he left behind years ago.

Surely it is also significant that writers from outside Canada have responded

to the landscape and its inhabitants not as a frontier for growth, but as a place of lonely refuge. *Maria Chapdelaine*, a kind of archetype of the Canadian novel with its seasonal time structure and steadfast heroine, is essentially a folk tale and for its author, Louis Hemon, a sophisticated Parisian, it represented a retreat into the simple world of the habitant. For Willa Cather the world of late seventeenth-century Quebec, which she recreated in *Shadows on the Rock*, represented a retreat from the cynically indifferent and ever-changing world at large; both the author and her characters take pleasure in "a feeling of being cut off from everything and living in a world of twilight and miracles." And in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, probably the greatest work of fiction to employ the Canadian landscape in its imagery, pastoral retreat is again the image of Canada which emerges. Geoffrey Firmin, the drunken protagonist of Lowry's master fiction, thinks of the cool, wooded inlets on the British Columbia coast as a kind of green, paradisial retreat from the hell of his guilt under the hot Mexican sun. The references are few, but always crucial, the structural antithesis to Firmin's volcano of self-destruction. In this same light it is interesting that the Canadian writers who have found the largest reading public outside Canada are those who have fashioned the innocent, self-contained world of pastoral in their art — writers like Lucy Maude Montgomery, Stephen Leacock and Mazo de la Roche.

THE TRULY REMARKABLE FACT about Ross's *As For Me and My House* is that it is a fully dramatized work of art. The emotional frustration that gave rise to the novel is not evaded in the details of an escapist pursuit (like Grove's drives or Scott's primitives), nor externalized in a struggle with nature; rather the deeply-felt experiences of rejection, failure and renewed hope are relentlessly focussed on and dramatized in the passionate triangles that form around the narrator and her husband. This is not to suggest that Ross's novel lies outside the tradition I have described; rather it puts it at the very centre, for what is dramatized is that overwhelming sense of life's limitations, of the repression and the evasions that are necessary to survive in the physical and emotional wilderness of the Canadian landscape. This novel's style — the claustrophobic narration of Mrs. Bentley presumably writing in her daybook — is the aesthetic consummation of that sense of frustration and limitation. In Ross's novel the details of the setting and of nature are never described for their own sake but are always subsumed within the emotional penumbra of the characters; the false fronts of the town, the leaky roof, the drought and heat, the dust storms, the

snow and tedium of an endless winter are all metaphors for the emotional drama.

The other Canadian novelist whose fiction is a fully dramatized art is Marie-Claire Blais. Unlike the other novels of Ross which are considerably less effective than *As For Me and My House*, all of Miss Blais's novels form a significant part of her art, though *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* stands out as her masterpiece to date. The essential drama around which her writing turns is set forth in her first published novel, *Mad Shadows* (*La Belle Bête*). Scarcely a novel, *Mad Shadows* is a kind of grotesque fairy-tale whose plot focusses ultimately on the failure of maternal love. The central figure in the story is the ugly daughter who is rejected by her beautiful mother for her loathsome physical appearance. Out of desperate envy of his beauty, she scars her idiot brother's face and both children, now unloved by the mother, end their lives in madness and suicide. Maternal rejection is an obsessive theme in Miss Blais's writing and in *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* its effect is central to a whole complex of miseries. In this story about a family of sixteen children the mother is an exhausted, shadowy figure, almost totally absent from the book. On the day of his birth Emmanuel cries for his mother, but he is told by the old grandmother that his mother has already gone back to the fields to work. The void created by the mother's absence defines the family drama of misery and despair; that void is brooded over by the formidable, larger-than-life figure of Grand-Mère Antoinette whose harshness and compassion are both idealized. From the viewpoint of the central consciousness, Jean-Le Maigre, *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* might be seen as a kind of aborted Bildungsroman; but the book is never a memory novel, for the plight of the unhappy family, though narrated episodically, is relentlessly exposed as a continuous action in the present.

A Season in the Life of Emmanuel is a particularly Canadian work of art for the sense of winter and of life's limitations (especially defined by poverty) are nowhere felt more strongly. Yet as in Ross's novel, these physical limitations serve to define the emotional deprivation that is being dramatized. That eroding sense of poverty is never externalized as a social issue, nor is the harshness of the Quebec landscape seen as an existentialist "condition." Rather, in the oblique and relentless manner of her writing Miss Blais remains faithful stylistically to the painful vision of her imagination and in so doing has created both a fully dramatic and genuinely Canadian work of art.