

editorial

OR EVERY BELLOWS BURST...

*An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind . . .*

So, PRAYING for his daughter and animadverting on his love for the splendid Maud Gonne — ruined by nationalist politics — wrote W. B. Yeats. These days his words return to me, not only — and most appropriately — in connection with his native Ireland, but also when I see the rising effects of “intellectual hatred” in Canada as well. Here I refer not only to what has gone on in Quebec, but also to much that happens in Anglophone Canada.

Canadian Literature is not a journal of politics, but there are ways in which the literary and the political life unavoidably meet. When any country emerges into a sense of the need to claim its political destiny, it is inevitable — and just — that writers should be called on to speak (which is their way of acting), and with a very few exceptions — Mordecai Richler is perhaps the most distinguished and certainly the most regrettable — Canadian writers have taken their stand

for independence. They have shown themselves — to use an uneasy but exact word — patriots.

But, as I have said elsewhere, patriotism and nationalism are not the same. The *patria* is a cultural and physical entity, a land and a way of life that accept love; the nation is a political entity, a machine that demands obedience. It is the failure to understand this truth that still produces so many fruitless controversies which, through the present close link between literature and the academy in Canada, impinge upon the world of writing. Even twenty years ago, a controversy over the employment of American scholars in Canadian universities would have sounded a distant drum for most Canadian writers. Now that CanLit has become an academic field, in which courses are proliferating from year to year, we find ourselves forced to listen to the confusions of those who seek to apply political criteria where, as the experience of so many totalitarian lands has shown us, their effects can only be fatal.

Too often the arguers tend to divide themselves into dogmatic blacks and whites, in an area of light where it is only the prismatic colours of creation that count. After five recent months abroad, which only enhanced my sense of personal identity with Canada, I returned to find the same old issues being threshed out in *Canadian Forum*. In a feature entitled "The Canadianization of our Literature Departments", S. P. Rosenbaum, a Canadian who appears to have spent some decades in the United States before returning to run a small English Department in Ontario, criticizes the more extravagant talk of our cultural nationalists (e.g. the Mathews-Steele demands for citizenship quotas applied to teachers in Canadian universities) and suggests also that the creation of more courses in Canadian Literature may not be the best way to encourage a real feeling for what writers are doing in this country.

Valid as these arguments may be, they are advanced with a cold intellectuality and a curious imperviousness to the depth of feeling — the sense of frustrated need — that today inspires the resolve of Canadians to create a culture of their own, independent and expressing a consciousness that — whether one chooses to call it regional or national — is unlike any other. It is a matter of opinions versus feelings and, as Yeats knew, in that struggle it is always safest to trust feelings. This is the conclusion that Professor Rosenbaum's opponent, Henri Beissel, has unfortunately also missed. Though he lacks the peculiar acrimony of *écrivains manqués* that distinguishes the leaders of the academic Canadianist movement, he still bases his arguments on strangely legalistic criteria. "What our nationalists are interested in knowing," says Professor Beissel, "is a man's citizenship since

that is the measure of his commitment . . . ” It is, of course, nothing of the kind. Patriotism and citizenship have no necessary connection, nor have citizenship and commitment, for the simple reason that the acquisition of citizenship is a mere form which the most cynical of intriguers can and often does adopt in order to further his own ends. A man who hesitates to take up citizenship because he feels that forms are meaningless may in fact have a truer sense of identity with Canada than a man who hastens to take the oath merely to make sure of his job. So far as writers are concerned — I leave it for others more qualified to speak of teachers of literature — it is in their work rather than in the political acts they may perform outside their writing life that we must look for evidence of their commitment.

The truth is that the feelings which accompany a man's transfer from one land to another, from one culture to another, are far too complex to be funneled into that moment when, in some courtroom, he takes an oath and signs a paper. We would certainly have a poorer literature, and a less interesting society, if there were no-one here but birthright Canadians. Yet there is no simple way of changing over, no total and irrevocable moment of rebirth in which a man ceases to be a foreigner and becomes a Canadian. Our greatest Canadians have often been precisely those in whom the impulses of their originating cultures survived most strongly. (Was not even Sir John A. Macdonald conscious to the end that he could not discard his British roots, and are not an essential Scottishness and a radical Irishness necessary components in the peculiar achievements of Hugh MacLennan and Morley Callaghan?)

Here the most salutary book that has been published in Canada for many a day is undoubtedly Naim Kattan's *Reality and Theatre* (Anansi, \$6.50), which appeared two years ago in Montreal in its original French, and last year in Paris. Kattan, who was born in Bagdad 44 years ago and migrated to Canada 18 years ago, has been a contributor to *Canadian Literature* almost from its beginnings, commenting with the sensitivity of an outsider steadily moving inward on Canadian writers in both our languages. His past presents an almost kaleidoscopic pattern of shifts, from the Jewish ambience of his childbirth into the Arab world, and thence on to the peripheries of English culture and into the luminous vortex of Paris, until at last he came to Canada and settled. That the end of such a pilgrimage should have been Canada and not France is something that can only be understood by reading *Reality and Theatre*. It is a series of essays, circling round a central theme that in Middle East, from which Kattan came, man — whether he is Moslem or Jewish — faces reality directly and

nature as an enemy, without the mediation of icons, while in the west such mediation is a necessary part of man's approach, so that in every way life becomes a succession of theatres. This results in a progressive loss of contact with reality, the death in life that characterizes modern civilizations and which entraps even the peoples of the East as they are led away by the passions of nationalism. Among the many striking sentences of a classically aphoristic book, Kattan makes a notable distinction between the fates of civilizations and those of individuals (of whom, after all, cultures are composed).

Death comes in any case. It ends as winner, and no civilisation has escaped its reign. Only a few isolated individuals, exiles from civilisation, escape death's domination, accepting each day as a rebirth. Doubtless they merely postpone the final deadline. But when it comes, they do not depart as losers. They do not submit before their time.

The most significant of the essays of *Reality and Theatre* to those Canadians who share with Kattan our multiple origins is that chapter, entitled "The Word and the Place", in which he talks of his own voluntary exile and his equally voluntary acceptance of a new home. And, for anyone — immigrant or birth-right — who attempts to live with full awareness in that peculiar dynamic equilibrium of origins and cultures which we call Canada, the last sentences of his book bear a salutary message: that we cannot create our present by rejecting our past.

If I accept the fact of being divided between communion and the ancient hope, it is because I reject the division of being, I refuse to live simultaneously in two worlds. My two universes are not superimposed. They continue each other, prolong one another in the movement that is life. Though my relationship with reality is conscious, it is not frozen by a lucidity of awareness that rules out adventure or chance. Alternation within continuity is creation; and my rapport with others is not a closed achievement but an eternal starting-point. I have opted for a language which I must invent as I speak. I have chosen a place which I endow with presence by inscribing my invention upon it. I have chosen a rapport with others which, far from imprisoning them in their own language or in a fixed place not of their choosing, draws them into a movement where language, place and the Other are invented every moment, obliging me to invent myself. I do not accept the fixity of safe places or the comfort of certitudes.

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As I have been writing these last words, on a darker morning than June should offer, a flat voice from Toronto has announced over the radio the death

of Edmund Wilson. There can have been few practical critics who — in the past generation — have entirely escaped the influence of this man who raised reviewing once again from a mere craft to the kind of art that Hazlitt had once practiced. His polymathic grasp of so many fields of knowledge, used by a supple and penetrating intelligence, enriched his writing in every direction, and books like *Axel's Castle*, *The Wound and the Bow* and *To the Finland Station* became classics in their own time and are likely to remain so. In *O Canada*, though his vision was at times a little blurred, Wilson showed a sympathetic understanding, before other American writers, of the forces that were creating a native Canadian literature.

GEORGE WOODCOCK