editorial

NEW DIRECTIONS IN PUBLISHING (1)

THE DECISION OF ITS CHURCHLY OWNERS to sell Ryerson Press to an American publishing empire is as great a blow to letters in Canada as politically motivated commentators have claimed it is to Canada's dwindling area of economic independence. One can only admire the public gesture with which A. W. Purdy, one of Canada's leading poets and one of *Canadian Literature*'s most valued contributors, made the matter an issue for writers. It is, of course, for every writer to decide precisely what action he shall take when such things happen; the important thing, as Purdy's protest emphasises, is that he should not remain indifferent, that he should recognize he has action to consider.

For this is not merely an ordinary business deal, a routine merger of corporations. It represents something far more disturbing in its implications: the abandonment to foreign control, after a period of generations, of a native publishing enterprise that had become an institution in Canada's cultural life. Perhaps Ryerson Press had fallen behind in the quality of its publication programmes in comparison with the great days of Lorne Pierce; we have often felt it. Perhaps it was not a very profitable enterprise. Nevertheless, it did represent a tradition of independent publishing which had a symbolic as well as an operative value. It not merely provided Canadian writers with a place where they could publish; it provided them also with a place where they could be published by Canadians and hence feel — in the difficult literary times of the past — that they were part of a community in which the writing, production and reading of books were in some measure organically linked.

It is long since anybody worried about the sectarian ownership of Ryerson Press; what mattered a great deal more was that a Canadian institution, the United Church, should support such a press and allow it to exist and operate with — in recent years at least — a notable and laudable freedom from editorial interference. Perhaps the United Church did find that the activities of the Ryerson

Press had moved outside the sphere of its own religious functions (though one might consider anything cultural as having a direct relation to the spiritual life), but it had a responsibility to sustain the Canadian tradition, and we remain unconvinced that every possible effort was indeed made to find a Canadian purchaser or sponsor before the offer of a foreign-controlled corporation was accepted.

At the same time, though we must deplore what has happened to Ryerson Press, and demand that urgent measures be taken to ensure that no other Canadian publishing house is similarly absorbed, we insist that the position in Canadian publishing is not nearly so imperilled as some commentators have suggested. We have seen statements that only two truly Canadian publishers are now left: McClelland & Stewart and Clarke Irwin. With due respect to these two houses, whose services to Canadian writing over the years have been invaluable, to regard them as our only completely Canadian publishers is to fail to recognize the revolution that has taken place during the past few years in publishing in this country. Not only have vigorous regional houses, like M. G. Hurtig in Edmonton, begun to challenge the centralization of publishing in Toronto. We have also seen the emergence of a formidable publishing underground (pioneered by Raymond Souster with the Contact Press and by Louis Dudek and his associates at the still flourishing Delta Press) whose activities not only represent a change in the nature of book production and distribution in Canada but also coincide, as I suspect the next few years will finally demonstrate, with a change in the character of writing in Canada at least as important as that which took place between the Twenties and the Forties.

In editorials for the coming year I intend to devote attention in some detail to this movement, which tends to bring publishing and writing closer than ever before.

The most striking single phenomenon is of course the emergence of that extraordinary alliance, confederation, symbiosis — call it what you will — House of Anansi and New Press. I am not sure of the exact relation between these two houses, or whether any formal link even exists between them; perhaps indeed there is no link except the fact that the originating inspiration for both of them appears to have come from Dave Godfrey, himself the best of the younger fiction writers as well as a university teacher of English and the editor for McClelland & Stewart of the Canadian Writers series of monographs in the New Canadian Library. Recently the editorial direction of Anansi appears to have fallen mainly to Dennis Lee; at New Press, Godfrey works in collaboration with two other

young writers who have had experience in trade publishing, Roy McSkimming and Jim Bacque. The really important facts about Anansi and New Press are that the people who run them are young, that they are themselves dedicated writers, that they are experimental in their approach to writing and radical in their approach to social change, and that they have been able to use cheap printing methods to bring out lists of new titles each publishing season which compare remarkably well with those of the regular trade houses.

The territories chosen by Anansi and New Press appear only vaguely demarcated from each other. New Press devotes the greater part of its attention to various aspects of the New (but not necessarily New Left) Politics, and to related social questions, but it does occasionally publish verse and fiction; in fact its most recent publication as I write this editorial — and its most ambitious book to date in size and format — is Dave Godfrey's remarkable novel, *The New Ancestors.* Anansi has been inclined, particularly since the emergence of New Press, to concentrate on verse and especially on experimental fiction.

It is on this role of House of Anansi that I shall concentrate in the present editorial. In the next issue I hope to write at length on the role and activities of New Press. Essentially, under the sensitive editorship of Dennis Lee, the role of Anansi has been to publish the experimental fiction of the writers who at this moment seem most likely to produce the significant Canadian novels of the relatively near future. The good books of verse Anansi has also published would certainly have appeared without the House, since by the time it began operations the facilities for publishing poetry in one way or another had already greatly exceeded the production of good verse, as any conscientious reader of the new poetry knows to the depths of ennui. It was Anansi's resolve to publish experimental fiction, regardless of the potential market, that was important. In the event, the public interested in such fiction showed itself to exist, so that Anansi has been not merely courageous but also successful.

At this point, Anansi has reached its thirteenth volume of fiction, and the record is a good one. I do not suggest that every title has been a great success; indeed, two of the first three, Graeme Gibson's *Five Legs* and Ray Smith's *Cape Breton is the Thought-Control Centre of Canada,* were poor experiments because the authors had obviously failed to realize that the cardinal law of the literary quest is to know one's destination; it is the way there that experiment discovers.

On the other hand, the third of the initial group of Anansi fiction was one of the best volumes of stories to be published in Canada for many a year, Dave Godfrey's *Death Goes Better with Coca-Cola,* sportsmen's sketches with an almost

Turgenevian sense of environment and a mercilessly cynical way with the human fauna.

It was after this initial trio that Anansi announced last year the project of Spiderline Novels, a series devoted to the first novels of young experimental writers. The series continues, for there have been at least two Spiderliners this year, and it appears still to be restricted to first novelists; but at the same time Anansi has published three works of fiction by writers who have already published before and elsewhere. This amounts, for 1969 and 1970, to a publication schedule of five or six novels a year, together with all the other books and booklets that come from Anansi, and it represents as much new fiction as any Canadian publisher except Jack McClelland brings out annually.

The authors of the first group of Spiderliners may be said to have a just grievance against *Canadian Literature*, though it would be due to one of those accidents every editor dreads and regrets once it has happened. An apparently conscientious reviewer accepted three of the books with enthusiasm, and never delivered the review. The consequence was that at the time of their publication only one of them, Peter Such's *Fallout*, received in this journal the attention it deserved. At least this omission gives a reason to say something by way of afterthought about the rest.

Having reviewed the whole group — Such's *Fallout*, Russell Marois's *The Telephone Pole*, Matt Cohen's *Korsoniloff*, John Sandman's *Eating Out* and Pierre Gravel's *A Perte de Temps*, in a Toronto paper when they originally appeared — I shall largely be repeating what I have already said, though Dennis Lee has persuaded me that *The Telephone Pole* is in fact a more interesting novel than I thought on first reading last year. However, I still cling to my view that *A Perte de Temps* was far and away the best book of the group, and that does tell us something important about the difference between young Francophone and Anglophone novelists.

A Perte de Temps, Anansi announced at the time, was the initial work in a plan to publish, in the original French, books by young Quebec writers who otherwise would probably not be read by Anglophone Canadians until at least five years after they first appeared, and then doubtless in bad translations. The experiment has not been repeated, and I suspect this is because Anansi has been unable to find another novel written in a French as limpid and as comprehensible even to the laziest bilingualist as that of Pierre Gravel, who writes in the lucid tradition of Gide and Camus.

A Perte de Temps, which was published simultaneously by the avant garde

publishing house in Quebec, Parti Pris, is, like all the fiction which Anansi has so far published, a *récit* or novella, rather than a full-sized novel, and in this way it follows one of the evident inclinations of young Canadian fiction writers in both languages — brevity accompanied by a drastic cutting away of the naturalistic detail and elaboration of dialogue that characterize the generation of novelists represented most prominently in Canada by Hugh MacLennan.

Read again in 1970, *A Perte de Temps* has even more immediacy than it had last year when it appeared, for it tells of a crucial day in the life of one of the Quebec terrorists of the early Sixties. Robert, the protagonist, receives a telephone call on a foggy night from one of his political comrades to say that an associate has been caught by the police; if the arrested man sings, they will all be picked up. Robert leaves his home to meet in a café the man who has called him. His friend does not arrive; Robert telephones and learns that the police have intercepted him. Knowing that sooner or later he will be picked up, he walks, sleeps in a park until the rain drenches and wakes him, dries off in a truck-drivers' eating house, and then, in the middle of the night, goes to his girl. In the morning he leaves her, and is arrested in the street.

The action is as simple as that, totally without melodrama, without even the violence one might expect in a novel of terrorists. What makes the story absorbing, apart from the supple and extremely evocative prose, is the way in which, recollecting incidents and conversations during his life as a terrorist, Robert's mental walk on that night reveals, quite unsensationally, the mental attitude — or rather the variety of mental attitudes — that lie behind the actions of the terrorists. There are those who think only of the end, and those who seek meaning entirely in action; those who merely drop out and those who, one suspects, betray. Most important, Robert is brought, on this night when a whole phase of his life seems to be ending, to consider how his past shaped his actions, how the feeling of a need to be decisive rose out of the consciousness that his father, a suicide, had totally failed in his life.

Gravel belongs to the same generation as the terrorists active in the early Sixties, but he writes with an assurance that makes his age as irrelevant as his Canadian origin. He has, of course, the local knowledge that gives the action authenticity, but otherwise it is in no way incongruous to think of him merely as a French writer in the larger sense. There is nothing in the least provincial about his handling of the language, and his whole attitude has a maturity lacking in most Anglophone writers of his age. His attitude to experimentation is especially healthy; he resorts to it only when it can further the purposes of his novel, and never for its

own sake. The consequence is that he has used a rather conventional linear form, but has broadened it by a very subtle use of memory and — on one occasion only — by a particularly effective use of dream as a revelatory device.

By contrast, all the Anglophone novels in the group — three by Canadians and one by an American — are immediately recognizable in terms of locality of origin (none, quite obviously, could emerge out of an English background) and also marked by a dogged experimentalism of form. There is a passionate rejection — even where it might be the best way of getting something into the reader's mind — of the conventional linear pattern. And often the manipulation of time shifts and of correspondences between apparently disparate threads of event and personality looks like apprentice work, by which I mean that it seemed to be done for practice, for effect, rather than because it is essential to the work in hand.

One has, of course, to take into account currently fashionable aesthetic stances. The idea of a finished work, even the ambition to compete in Stendhal's lottery of being read in a hundred years, have both lost a great deal of their appeal in a century when one wonders whether there are a hundred years to go for mankind. The unfinished texture that characterizes some of these books, which look as though a good working over would have vastly improved them, is obviously to some extent deliberate.

Questions of finish apart (if one can ever put them apart) there is a great deal that is interesting in Spiderline's first four novellas in English. Russell Marois explores perhaps most thoroughly the possibilities of the non-linear novel in his complex fantasy on the remotely interweaving lives of four marginilians in urban society; there are moments of brilliant hallucinatory fantasy, passages of great linguistic virtuosity, signs of a talent that may one day profoundly influence the character of Canadian fiction in general. Peter Such's *Fallout*, a novel in which the component and parallel elements are not nearly so well managed, as he tells of the collapse of a boomtown society, is perhaps most memorable for a very moving interpolated short story of an Indian and a white girl going to a lake island and making love. Matt Cohen's *Korsoniloff* is probably the most polished of all the novellas, and it shows an interesting shift away from the campus obsession which so recently gripped young Canadian and American writers; though Korsoniloff is a university teacher, it is his off-campus self that we observe, as he drifts through his curiously passionless relationships, and he is meant to interest us as a psychotic rather than a professor — unless his alienation is itself a comment on our sick educational system. In all these novels the middle-class life of which MacLennan wrote is avoided; new Canadian fiction has shifted its interest into

the lower depths and the fringes of society. The leading characters in *Fallout* are Indians and construction workers, in *The Telephone* they are denizens of a fantastic underworld; in *Eating Out* a burlesque game of cops and robbers in a New York hamburger joint is enacted through the eyes of a half-witted rubbydub. It is the kind of world that fascinates young writers at times of social breakdown, as it did in the French Nineties, in Russia before the Revolution, in England during the Thirties. In Quebec the literary rebellion has been more sharply related to the political rebellion, and for this reason it has felt less of an obligation to seek experimentation for its own sake; doubtful though the political success of separatism may have been, its literary success is an accomplished fact, and there are more good Frencophone than Anglophone fiction writers.

Not that it is impossible to produce in English Canada a novel as good as *Perte de Temps*. Indeed, Anansi has proved in its 1970 publications that it can be and is being done. Apart from a translation of Roch Carrier's remarkable novel, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (reviewed in its original version in *Canadian Literature* some issues ago) these include three novels, all of greater substance and complexity than the earlier Spiderliners, and all nearer to life, less conditioned by formal imperatives. They are Rachel Wyatt's *The String Box* and Michael Charters' *Victor Victim*, both first novels by writers out of their twenties who came from England, and Marian Engel's *The Honeyman Festival*, a second novel which more than fulfils the promise of her first book, *No Clouds of Glory*. Perhaps the great test was that, while one read the 1969 Anglophone Spiderliners with a constant awareness of effort not too well concealed, and therefore remained constantly the critical observer looking in, one enters *The String Box* and *Victor Victim* and *The Honeyman Festival*; they are microcosms that absorb one. They will all be reviewed in *Canadian Literature*, but must be mentioned here to emphasize the extent to which, in three years of courageous publishing and good editing, the House of Anansi has revealed new possibilities in the arts of fiction, of whose health the literary diagnosticians had so often despaired.

G.W.