

3. *The Novel in English*

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WHEN *Canadian Literature* began in 1959, Canada was happily experiencing a traumatic publishing season. All at once appeared an impressive collection of books: Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night*, Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, John Buell's *The Pyx*, Callaghan's *Collected Stories*, and others. They came at the end of a curious decade, one that for all its wars had been basically hopeful, enjoying affluence while its people remembered the Depression, and emphasizing the need for at least the appearance of security at a time when World War II could not yet be spoken of with objective dispassion. But 1959 began a decade too, a rather less satisfied one, certainly less overtly stable, and these books contain within them a hint of the disappointments that writers in the sixties were to worry over and respond to.

Some indication of this changing attitude can be seen in the direction taken by Richler and MacLennan alone. Whereas *The Watch that Ends the Night* had ended in a metaphysical peace, with the promise that Montreal's winter identity would be subsumed in its international role, MacLennan's later novel *Return of the Sphinx* (1967) denies that

peace. Seething with political disruption, it discovers a winter not of discontent so much as of a humourless determination to protest. Like Ronald Hambleton (to use the title of his 1959 novel), MacLennan has insisted in the past that "every man is an island" — a canoe, on the ocean, with a storm rising. By individually accepting this, his earlier characters, George Stewart, Catherine, and Jerome Martell, could survive the threat of disintegration. They could accept their selves, in effect, and "living their own death", let others live theirs. But the characters of *Return of the Sphinx* — Alan and Daniel Ainslie — so much more bound by a preconceived notion of a world order, so much less capable of understanding any other, cannot communicate. Failing, they locate the fault outside themselves: the one, defensive, finding threat in "winter" rebellion; the other, rebellious, and in his own way equally narrow-minded, trying to announce the "winter" as the only truth.

Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* similarly closes on a "dark" possibility, though the ironic treatment makes it seem less foreboding. Duddy, a triumph both because and in spite of himself, threatens to become an extraordinary kind of conservative when he

buys land and so acquires a bourgeois position in the eyes of society. It's hardly what he expected, but the irony is a nice touch at the end of his comic progress. The implications are more astringent, however. What happens when rebels, achieving power, turn into inverted conservatives? What can the mild conservative do when he starts to look like a dangerous liberal? Richler's comic gifts turn these possibilities into high camp in the interrupted scenarios that make up *Cocksure* (1968), but again in this later work the characters lose their identity rather than find it. They live lives designed for them by Madison Avenue and the movies so much that real emergencies cannot break their stance; humanity disappears along with naiveté, and only the brittle would-be sophisticates remain. In another context entirely, Northrop Frye notes: "A provincial society will produce a phenomenon like the tea party described in F. R. Scott's well-known satire, 'The Canadian Authors Meet'. A metropolitan society would turn the tea party into a cocktail party, and the conversation would be louder, faster, more knowing, and cleverer at rationalizing its pretentiousness and egotism." It doesn't mean it will be more worthwhile, and it nicely describes *Cocksure*.

Frye also points out in *The Modern Century* what is a favourite Blakean theme with him: "The child's vision is far behind us. The world we are in is the world of the tiger, and that world was never created or seen to be good. It is the subhuman world of nature, a world of law and of power but not of intelligence or design." This sensibility, with all its attendant frustration, is what characterizes the writing of the sixties. A few works do escape, often through irony,

into happiness — Mitchell's *The Kite* (1962), Elliott's *The Kissing Man* (1962), Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (1960), St. Pierre's *Breaking Smith's Quarter Horse* (1966). But often a "peace" that is discovered at the end of a book is possible only after denying a way of life that had been apparently peaceful. Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) is an obvious example. Set in a prairie Mennonite community, it explores the nature of repression: in young people who are coming to sexual maturity, and in a society that by attempting to deny violence actually breeds it. Yves Thériault's *Agaguk* (tr. 1963) is comparable: the title character, if he is to find contentment, must leave his band and relinquish to his wife some of the traditionally male prerogative of making family decisions. David Walker's *Where the High Winds Blow* (1960), Jane Rule's *The Desert of the Heart* (1964), Brian Moore's *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* (1966), Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* (1966), and Robert Hunter's *Erebus* (1968) supply further examples; all five of them, showing crises of conscience that lead to violence or disruption, also suggest a hesitant and uncertain but basically positive future.

In the popular formula books, too (written with varying degrees of imagination and skill), where one might expect saccharine solutions, we find an accompanying kind of muted terror. This perhaps has always been true, from Gothic novels to detective fiction, so it is not surprising to find it in Arthur Hailey's *In High Places* (1961), Charles Israel's *The Hostages* (1966), or in other works by these prolific writers. Though too often the terror can itself become a stance, a stylization exploited for its sen-

sationalism or indulged for its commercial value, it will sometimes be more than this. It will pervade a whole work, as in James Clavell's *King Rat* (1962), and not so much characterize its tone, or be in conflict with even a comic tone, as it will underlie the situations and provide the sensibility by which we understand them. A Victorian example of all this would be Edward Lear's "The Jumblies", which for all its comic surface presents us with a frightening world. The decade of the 1960's is not so far from the Victorians as it has often liked to think, and its conflicts involving identity, order, chaos, religion and science have their roots in an earlier time.

The works of Marie-Claire Blais, one of the best of the new writers of the decade, illustrate this exploration of the "psychology" of the present day. *Mad Shadows* (tr. 1960), *Tête-Blanche* (tr. 1961), and *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* (tr. 1966) all present "abnormal" families wending their way as

quickly as possible towards decadence. But as writers around the world in the previous decade had shown — *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *Catch-22* (1955), etc. — "madness" in a mad world that fancies itself sane comes to be a kind of sanity. Leonard Cohen's now famous lyric "Suzanne takes you down" is a perfect extension of this. Cohen, George Bowering (*Mirror on the Floor*, 1967), and Gwendolyn MacEwen (*Julian the Magician*, 1963) have all been concerned with developing new techniques for Canadian fiction, and with breaking down not only the barriers between poetry and prose but also those between the sensual and the spiritual. It is one of the things "Suzanne" is about, and one that the madness/holiness/innocence/guilt complex tries to evoke.

Political protest is a different kind of extension of this same problem of chaos, and (also characteristic of the 1960's) we see the psychology of it examined in Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), and David Lewis Stein's fine first novel *Scratch One Dreamer* (1967). We see the political encounter between youth and age, Québec and *les Anglais*, raised vividly in MacLennan's *Return of the Sphinx* (1967), but extended into violence more frequently in French-Canadian works, as in Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Episode* (tr. 1967), Jacques Godbout's *Knife on the Table* (tr. 1968), or Gratien Gélinas's play, *Yesterday the Children Were Dancing* (tr. 1967). Fortunately there are more and more French-Canadian works being quickly and artistically translated into English, which may not serve the cause of bilingualism, but does give aid to understanding, so there is at least some interim value. And if the translations are



themselves artistic, the more reason to appreciate their existence.

Also translated have been works which inform the literature with a political background: Jean le Moynes's *Convergences* (tr. 1966), or Jean-Paul Desbiens's *The Impertinences of Frère Untel* (tr. 1965), which should give English-speaking writers a new perspective towards their land. The venture into political spheres is interesting in Canadian fiction, unusual enough to be noteworthy and noteworthy enough for Edmund Wilson to pick up and even overstress in his *O Canada* (1965), for the political books still work as psychological studies. To ignore this aspect of the recurrent examinations of self, in emphasizing the political, is to ignore what has by now become the typical Canadian mode. The number of works one could list in illustration is not endless, but so long as to be bibliographic rather than discursive. Writers like Peter Taylor, Diane Giguère, George Ryga, Margaret Laurence (in a beautiful 1964 novel, *The Stone Angel*, recreating in retrospect the life of an old woman during her dying days as she strives for a freedom she has never quite realized she has), and Henry Kreisel (with his second novel, *The Betrayal*, 1964) all have come into print. And all are concerned not just with broadly political relationships, but with the individual reasons for them, which is something different.

Freedom has been a key word in the fiction of the decade, a freedom variously defined in political terms, or as freedom from the material minutiae of modern life, or as freedom to act as an individual, or as freedom from the self and the sense perceptions that limit its understanding. How individual a person can be in an age of causes and moral imperatives is exactly

the point taken up by so many of the partly political books, like *Scratch One Dreamer*; the hero, here, would prefer to avoid committing himself to anything, but he finds himself drawn into action until he finally chooses to act. Whether or not this is freedom is another question. As Alden Nowlan writes:

In those days, the vanquished
surrendered their swords like gentlemen,
the victors alone
surrendered their illusions.
The easiest thing to do for a cause
is to die for it.

And in Nigel Foxell's *Carnival* (1968), with its German setting, we find just such a choice examined. By choosing to leave the country rather than fight a duel that could only strengthen other people's positions, Walter Phalts gains a kind of personal liberty at the expense of a possibly ephemeral fame. That he still looks like a loser is natural in a world like the one Foxell shows us, but what it *feels like* — from inside Walter Phalts, for example — is what more and more writers have tried to express.

In the process, subjects for fictional examination have widened — particularly with censorship retreating into the background — and expression has become freer; characters do and say things that earlier writers might have known but not written about, heard but not said. The result, as one might expect, is a *mélange* of license and art, and the license is as much an impingement on freedom as it is freedom itself. But readers retain the choice of which books to read, so ultimately we are better off. This does not defend all recent Canadian novels, for many, despite their vivid details, are rude rather than revealing; they exploit rather than attempt to understand. If Stephen

Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women* (1965) begins delightfully comically, it ends up a sort of "Rake's Digress", repetitive and in the long run boring. And Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will be Sunday* (1966) or Scott Symons' *Place d'Armes* (1967), the one embarrassed, disguising itself in sympathy, and the other militant, displaying the narrator's wilful self-degradation, both encourage not understanding so much as a commercially successful snigger.

Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), on the other hand, is a different quality of book entirely. It is written well and it has something to say — all too rare a combination, but welcome when it appears. The narrator, trapped in a triangular affair involving both his wife and their male lover, is both satisfied and desolated by his relationships and is anything but free because of them. Constantly losing himself and being made beautiful by his experiences, and constantly recognizing and losing respect for himself, he is torn in opposing directions, seeking at last in metaphysics for an answer to his dilemma. But in seeking a spiritual communion with Catherine Tekakwitha, a 17th Century Iroquois saint, he discovers not the peace that MacLennan's characters could find in metaphysics in *The Watch that Ends the Night*, but brutal sensuality and the kind of accompanying doubt of saintliness, the suspicion of pride, that one finds in an earlier work like Callaghan's *The Loved and The Lost* (1951). Réjean Ducharme's brilliant *The Swallower Swallowed* (tr. 1968), raises a comparable dilemma. The young girl narrator, caught in Arab

crossfire in Israel at the end of the book, deliberately sacrifices her companion in order to preserve herself. Is this sense or cowardice? Is amorality possible? The questions stand unresolved. People at large, not aware of the 'facts', consider Bernice a heroine, and she complacently accepts the tribute. It was "what they needed", she adds, and if the sentiment smacks of condescension, it is also honest. Honesty has become callous, and the underlying bitterness shows through. It isn't disillusionment particularly; it's just disappointment, made acrid by a kind of anarchy when love itself seems insular and values dead. When Austin Clarke, in his third novel *The Meeting Point* (1967), examines the prejudice and violence that face West Indian immigrants in Toronto, we are still not far from this feeling. After its wry comedy the book turns "sour", and the central character, Bernice Leach, becomes less angry than hollow. She ends up listening to "talking and talking" — to words — which are meaningless beside her knowledge of injustice and her more and more futile ache for understanding.

There is no immediate or easy exit from problems like these, no peace untainted by a kind of corruption, no beauty undisturbed by the very existence of the self, which at once allows an individual identity and limits what it can do. Like Cohen's poems in *Flowers for Hitler* (1964), Clarke's novel and Ducharme's speak to their generation of commitment and emptiness. The ironies are dark, the humour is brittle, and any affirmations are a little wistful in an uncertain world.