

#### 4. *The Short Story in English*

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AROUND 1955 there arose among Canadian writers a creative quest for new approaches to literary expression. A gradual but firm attempt was made to break away from the established forms of writing, beginning firstly with the novel, then with poetry, and finally with the short story. There were Hugh MacLennan and the other innovators of new approaches to narrative within the novel; there was the inception of a more modern voice in poetry which was to flourish in Leonard Cohen and other, often younger, poets; and, more important for our interests here, there was the short story which was to become at last a separate development in Canada with standards distinct from other literary forms. No longer was the story to be a sketch or studied episode which reflected a sense of a purely Canadian landscape. Until 1950 or so, the story in Canada appeared to be machine-made, with two-dimensional characters solving artificial dilemmas; there was a tendency to regionalism and to oppressive details of the depression and of poverty, little poetry within the style, and no experimentation. It seemed that the short story in Canada had stopped growing, even after the surge given to it by Morley Callaghan and Ethel Wilson. The majority of writers

seemed content in reflecting merely the Canadianness of their art.

There was little or no hint that the short story would gain new delicacy in the fine hands of Mavis Gallant or Ethel Wilson in her later stories, or would be reshaped by others like Hugh Garner and Alice Munro. Soon the story was not one told by a carefully engineered plot, but by the subtle implication of selected isolated incidents. Arrangement began to play a greater part, and significance lay in what appeared, at the outset, to be casual episodic moments. On the surface, the life depicted in the short stories of the sixties may seem to be trivial or unimportant. It is, however, put in such a way as to interpret the individual life below. The constrained plot was replaced by a record of life seen at first hand; this was a realism without the Canadian artificiality associated with the thirties and forties.

Obviously the writers of the late fifties and the sixties felt that their time was a vital age with something new to say. Literary techniques needed innovation; a different means of communicating modern values and ideas to the reader was justified. The predominant characteristic of the time was one of puzzled and anxious confusion. It was not the first age to feel this in Canada, for many

late nineteenth-century writers had found disillusionment in things around them and had eased themselves by the contemplation of the past and of nature. It was the first age, however, to be pervaded by an uneasy and nameless guilt concerning its situation. There seemed to be nothing to save mankind except an examination of the unconscious reasoning behind its confused state. Every writer became more conscious of himself and of the reasoning behind his actions; men began to search to know themselves more than they had in any age before in Canada. The difference between Canadian writing and writing in Canada was made. The focus changed so that the Canadianness dissolved into the periphery of the writer's world and voice. Since literature surely reflects the problems of its age, writers created their stories with an undisguised interest in the characters' reaction to a specific situation until the focus of the story was no longer on the situation but rather on the characters themselves. The aim of literature now was not to tell a story or to describe an episode, but rather to reveal the individual reactions to it.

Since writers were becoming more interested in their own thinking, this introspection became an intrinsic part of their stories. Characters began to be revealed by the thoughts regarding their reaction to a specific situation; they, too, were looking inward just as their creators were. The reader was called upon by technique to become a part of the story, and rather than associate himself with something which could easily have happened to him, he was not limited to identifying himself with the character. No longer did the reader question the authenticity of a story because of its universal situation which could have implicated anyone;

rather, he was concerned because he could see the individuals reacting as he himself would react. His own mind was identified with the thinking of the character, and the story lived for him because he was taking part in it. The era of the reader sitting on the outside looking in on the action was gone; he was now a part of that action. The short story was no longer an entertainment for short bus rides and longer trips across Canada by train, but rather was an emotional and intellectual experience for the reader. In the space of a few years the short story in Canada was radically changed. It had the tradition of Canada behind it, of writers who tried to record their time; but it also had the tradition of the novel and poetry in the thirties and forties, of writers who had worked out the focus on the Canadian identity into the framework of their own writing. Outward action was now fused with the character's inner sensations. Because the focus was now on character portrayal rather than on plot, the short story in Canada rapidly changed.

In the late fifties the move began, and in 1960, as though to clear the way for the new movement to get completely under way, Robert Weaver edited, for Oxford, *Canadian Short Stories*. This collection was in a sense a comprehensive presentation of the growth of the short story in Canada beginning with E. W. Thomson, Duncan Campbell Scott and Charles G. D. Roberts, and ending with a story by a younger, and perhaps even wiser, Mordecai Richler. It settled the historical position of the story in Canada, and showed clearly that writers were, for the most part, interested mainly in plot and action usually within a rural framework. It was saying quite plainly that

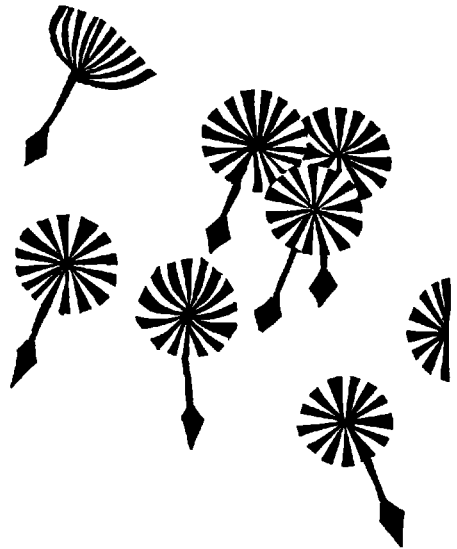
"this has been done; now we move on to other things". What was happening was that though some writers were inclined to use an obvious Canadian setting, many of the stories could have happened anywhere and were not restricted by place in sacrifice to a sense of time. It was the first resounding contemporary voice that was heard through the land. Mavis Gallant in *Green Water, Green Sky* indicated that the change was occurring. But since no change is abrupt, there were still traces of the past interest in action, as in Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Ship that Died of Shame and other stories*, and Thomas Raddall's *At the Tide's Turn and Other Tales*. It was a year, too, for Canadian publishers to acknowledge work by Canadian writers working on subjects outside the Canadian context: the most obvious example was Margaret Laurence's *This Side Jordan*, which brought a new and pure voice to contemporary fiction. It made Canadians aware of their own contemporaneity.

By 1961 the dam burst, and all kinds of collections of stories were printed. Was it because Canadian publishers realized the value of short stories for a public interested in doing their reading quickly since there were so many other things available to consume time? This may be partly the reason, but there was also an interest in and a demand for stories of many types. Desmond Pacey revised his *A Book of Canadian Stories* that year, augmenting Weaver's book of 1960, in showing the development of the tradition within Canada. Other books of historical interest appeared, too, like Pauline Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver*, and W. O. Mitchell recording the pastness of the past with his *Jake and the Kid*. But the subtle shifting sands of taste were mois-

tened by Norman Levine, Ethel Wilson, and Malcolm Lowry.

Levine's *One Way Ticket* showed the interest in people rather than plot, and this was strengthened even more so by Mrs. Wilson's *Mrs. Golightly and other Stories* which brought a sense of quality to short fiction in Canada. But though people superseded plot, it is the sense of idea and philosophy, of intuition and sensibility, that particularly marks 1961 with the publication of Malcolm Lowry's *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Though these stories were written at least a decade before they were published in 1961, they show quite directly the influence of Canada on Lowry; the interest in place was not new in Lowry's work but the Canadian setting gave him a sense that his quest had been achieved. "The Forest Path to the Spring" is superb in its handling of place, and in its understanding of the human spirit; it is undoubtedly the best story of the decade.

There is then a gradual shift from the



rural to the urban, but this shift is more marked in the sensibility revealed than it is in the settings employed. The writers are obviously much more sophisticated in their view of human nature; traces of sentimentality are gone; the language is more precise, and more astringent. These qualities are evidenced in the work of Hugh Hood (*Flying a Red Kite*, 1962, and *White Figure, White Ground*, 1964) and Hugh Garner (*Hugh Garner's Best Stories*, 1963; *Men and Women, Stories*, 1966). Both these men manage to retain on occasion a Canadian flavour — be it a kind of backwood's humour, or whimsy? — and still inject their work with contemporary modes and considerations. This direction is also seen in the stories by two women writers who, though they write within the Canadian context, set their stories often outside Canada; both Margaret Laurence (*The Tomorrow Tamer*, 1964) and Audrey Callahan Thomas (*Ten Green Bottles*, 1968) use the sophistication of outside experience to portray nuances of character. I say "sophistication" because this is the quality which had made Canadian writers of the short story universal in their appeal and effect; it is also what accounts for the fact that they are speaking in a modern voice. The world is smaller and Canadian writers are heard elsewhere aside from within the unknown country. The sensibility behind the writer, the Canadian writer, has enabled him to move easily into the contemporary fluidity of literature. The mosaic which marks so obviously the Canadian heritage has also made it easier for Canadians to work with the contemporary problems of alienation, compassion, and love, which makes up so much a part of the themes of contemporary fiction. Again, Mavis Gallant

reveals this quality; though she lives in France and writes for *The New Yorker*, she is particularly Canadian, if only because of the very natural way she belongs to the contemporary scene.

In the past five years there has been a definite interest on the part of the reading public in short stories, and Canadian publishers have satisfied the need commendably. It is a genre that is appealing to more people, not only for light reading but also for serious thinking. The master of the short story in Canada — and still the best — Morley Callaghan, has been reprinted. His followers have moved to the works of others; there are quite a number of good short story writers in Canada who have published recently aside from the ones mentioned above: Dave Godfrey, Shirley Faessler, and David Helwig. It is objectivity that marks these writers, an ability to remove themselves as writers and Canadians from the scenes they present, to be external in approach, and yet be able to select details that are at once precise yet cosmopolitan. Their humanity particularizes their work, and at the same time carries them into universal themes that are appreciated by the whole of mankind. This may appear to be a mundane comment, but as I looked over the volumes of short stories that have been published over the last ten years I was constantly reminded that here was a group of good writers, no longer stilted by a desire to be Canadian writers, but willing to be world writers and to be writing in Canada, though undoubtedly they could write anywhere, as many of them have done. And behind their often excellent work lies the background of Canada, reaching toward a significance that is beyond the only national.

When I look back over the last ten years of the short story in Canada, it is obvious that as long as there is synthesis and refinement, a successful attempt to modify a traditional form, an achievement of artistic visions of experience and of beauty, and a constant search for truth in experiment, what has been accomplished in the short story form in Canada has added diversity and richness to the literature of our time. Art is always changing; it neither accepts conformity nor does it like repetition. The last ten years has seen a growth that has been quick, a rapid change from a story whose focus was on plot and the Canadian setting, to one of character synthesis and

compelling philosophies. It has been a time of introspection, and one where interest has been in immediacy. Perhaps more than any other genre, the Canadian short story in the last ten years has reflected very well the problems of its own society. It is a rich and widely diverse period; today, to all outward appearances, the short story in Canada is confident of its own vitality and resources, produced by writers who question the assumptions on which the national short story had been constructed, and who search for forms and techniques more closely in touch with the problems of their day, and are more realistic in their treatment of them.

