

TURVEY AND THE CRITICS

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THIS SUMMER I did some moonlighting as a nursing aide in the complicated midwifery occasioned by the rebirth of Private Thomas Turvey as hero of a musicale in Charlottetown's Confederation Theatre. In the course of these duties, sometimes baffling but always exhilarating, I mulled over a scrapbook of reviews of the original *Turvey, a military picaresque* (or "picturesque" as the *Monetary Times* had it). Although some of this material is now seventeen years old, it contains patterns of criticism which seem to me to have relevance still to the problems of the writer in Canada, and perhaps elsewhere. What follows is offered as delayed author's brooding on the judgments of these critics.

1. *Licence, poetic or critical*

ELSEWHERE¹ I have suggested that one of the peculiar and continuing bedevilmments of the Canadian literary scene is a tendency for the poets and the prose fiction writers to exist, or to be expected to exist, in water-tight compartments. Our professors of literature take it in their stride that many "foreign" poets, of significance at least in their day, from Boccaccio, through Sidney, Nashe, Samuel Johnson, Goldsmith, Poe, to Hardy, Kipling, de la Mare, e. e. cummings, Lawrence and Graves, also made genuine contributions to the development of prose fiction; but when a Canadian poet offers a plain prose novel, the Canadian critic is stopped in his tracks. At least it seemed so to me in the months following the appearance of *Turvey* in 1949:

"The kind of book . . . that one would not expect a well-known poet to write . . . lurid language . . . decidedly earthy" muttered a Winnipeg reviewer, who did not exactly approve of earth. A Vancouver columnist, hitherto one of my strongest fans, confessed himself mystified that "a distinguished poet . . . should write a 288-page book about a burlesque soldier . . . especially when it's obvious

that barrack-room humour (or perhaps humour of any kind) is not his meat. I read it with vague embarrassment." Others, it's true, were more agreeably surprised, but sometimes their astonishment revealed an assumption that poets are by definition humourless, dull, and unrealistic creatures inhabiting the non-significant and depressed areas of writing.

It's an image of the Canadian poet which undoubtedly persists, a product of the categorical naïveté of our critics, and of an emphasis upon outmoded romantic poetry by the educators who first formed our critics, and of a tendency in our poets themselves to accept such an image and remain unventuresome in the exploration of their own gifts as writers. Layton and Purdy live content in the valley that Carman and Pratt settled, MacLennan and Callaghan in the next. The critics, on Black Mountain, watch both ways against cattle raids.

Indeed I think the image persists even into that extremely generous and thoughtful and friendly preface to the most recent edition of *Turvey*, written by the editor of *Canadian Literature* himself.² For it's plain that my friend George Woodcock expects novels by "lifetime poets" to be "strange, outlandish" and never "massive or major". Such writers, he says, "don't worry about plausible psychology, . . . the consistency of timetables, . . . the authenticity of medical symptoms. . . . The fact they are poets seems to license any break into fantasy." While Mr. Woodcock cites many convincing examples of his thesis, from the roster of poets' novels, I do feel that, in the case of *Turvey*, he has let his preconceptions about "lifetime poets" license him into a critical fantasy. Within the limitations of a satirical picaresque, I certainly had to worry, like any novelist, about "plausible psychology" when I wrote *Turvey*, and a great deal about accuracy of time both in relation to the acts of the characters and to the parallel events of the war; and I have not yet encountered a doctor, out of the good many who have spoken or written to me about this book, who pointed out a single instance of inaccuracy in the handling of medical symptoms. This is no great boast on my part, since most of *Turvey's* misadventures in this respect happened first to me, and it did not put any great strain on my traumatic memories to pass them on to him.

I am simply arguing for a point which Canadian criticism of this book (and Canadian criticism only) still compels me to make, obvious as it ought to be: that a poet, particularly a "lifetime" one, should be conceivably able to write in any form current in his literary milieu, and *be expected* to perform in it as well, at least, as the next man. If he tries and seems to fail, the critic should perhaps take a second and harder look at the poetry, but not offer an *argumentum ad poetam* about the prose.

2. *The Professor turned Novelist*

“A STRANGE BOOK to come from a professor of English”, said the *London Free Press*. The same Vancouver critic who was embarrassed by a Canadian poet attempting a novel of barrack-room humour also “knew” the attempt was doomed from the start because it didn’t “come from the level of the soldier . . . but from a highly literate, intelligent and polished professor of English.” Here is another of our very Canadian critical shibboleths. I know, I know — I go about the country arguing that prolonged sojourn in Canadian universities, especially in English departments, sets monastic limits to a writer’s experience, as well as turning his style to glue. The fact is, however, that most North American novelists who are now in their forties or fifties have taught English in universities. Consequently in the United States no one is surprised when a professor writes a novel, or prejudices it as untrue to experience, for if the professor has succeeded in treating “real” life with veracity, it may well be because he has lived for considerable periods in other groves than the academe, or indeed that he possesses an imagination particularly resistant to campus atrophy. In my case the world of the Canadian Active Army, in which I spent nearly four years of my life, at least kept me sufficiently on “the level of the soldier” to make what I wrote about it look accurate enough to pass unchallenged by the other old sweats (who have been, from the start, the chief readers and buyers of *Turvey*). On the other hand, the critics who found mine a “professor’s book” have been, to my knowledge, precisely those who themselves had no personal experience of army life, and probably knew little of writer-professors either.

3. *If I had a daughter*

THE ALLEGED SEXUAL REVOLUTION has undoubtedly put a more knowing look on the face of Canadian writing in the two decades since *Turvey* was written. It is unlikely that I would become involved today, as I was in 1948, in prolonged and tangled correspondence with my Toronto publisher in order to preserve one letter out of the four in some of the words my characters needed to use.

Let us not have illusions, however. The sale of books in the smaller centres (where most Canadians live) is still very much determined by the reaction of the lone local newspaper reviewer, or a single wire-service journalist. From the treatment recently handed out to books like Vizinczey’s *In Praise of Older Women*, and Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, I have no reason to think that the *Windsor Daily Star*, for example, would not again damn *Turvey*, surely a mild enough

kitten among sex-cats even in his period, as “a rogue of the dirtiest water”. And it might be that Malcolm Ross, if he were reviewing my book for “Critically Speaking” in 1966, would still feel compelled, as in 1949, even while praising the “tang and veracity” of its “spoken language . . . fresh to Canadian writing”, to add that it was “too fresh for Canadian radio. I shall not risk quotation. The humour is entirely physical — even intestinal . . . successful so long as he avoids the demands of meaning and morality. Once these demands break in, vulgarity is merely vulgar . . .” etc. Fun is fun, but as another C.B.C. reviewer put it, in that not so far-off year: “I will go so far as to say that it is the funniest book written by a Canadian that I have read . . . yet whether I should want my daughter to read it . . . if I had a daughter . . . is another question.” Those hypothetical daughters still languish in the homes of some critics and some broadcasting governors.

Nor should Canadians be under the illusion that the prudish reviewer really helps to increase a book’s sales. The “shekels” did not “roll in”, as the Toronto *Varsity* predicted, when *Turvey* was banned in 1949 by several Ontario libraries, and described in *Saturday Night* as exhibiting “a Rabelaisian reliance on the bodily functions and the Army’s treatment of them”. For the point which the critic (in this case Arnold Edinborough) made, was that the “Rabelaisian reliance” made much of the book “an unamusing affair”. And when a reviewer tells you a novel is unamusing, he is influencing you not to buy it. It happened that *Turvey*, like many another “Rabelaisian” novel — I only wish it deserved the unintended compliment — eventually achieved a good though by no means spectacular sale in Canada, and continues to have a modest one, but all this has been in despite of the critical Grundies, not because of them. Even in its new form this summer as a musicale, *Turvey*, though it had better than average houses, never achieved the sell-out success of its companion offering, *Anne of Green Gables*, for the word went round in Prince Edward Island even before *Turvey* opened that the play’s language was not at all like Anne’s, indeed unlike anything suited for the ears of Island females. I’ve no doubt *Turvey* will survive the Puritan provincials, but I’m damned if this will be any reason for thanking them.

4. *Friend or enema?*

FROM MY MAIL, and from word of mouth, over seventeen years, I know now who *Turvey*’s friends have been. And they are exactly those whom many early reviewers predicted would reject him. They are the ex-army medicos, psychologists and psychiatrists whom the *Montreal Gazette*’s reviewer

predicted would be the most displeased. They are the rank and file who returned, and did not find, as did another critic, that the book was "a dismal synopsis of all the dreary conversations they had to listen to so many times in five years of war". They are the fellow Turveys, of both sexes, and all services and ranks (including one General), veterans of any war, hot or cold. They are Turvey's fellow clowns, who never twigged, as did the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, that Turvey was merely "a stooge" through whom I vented untimely undergraduate sneers at a government that had done everything possible for the returned soldier. "Perhaps not so warmly applauded by soldiers as by critics of the Canadian literary scene", wrote a *Letters in Canada* critic in 1950. The reverse was true.

Now it is 1966 and the old veterans are dying off; but the new critics have come around, and *Turvey* is supplementary reading in some Can. Lit. courses. I would be inclined to accept this as Turvey's death-kiss if I hadn't been in Charlotte-town this summer and watched a new generation of his friends teaching my old half-track to sing and dance, and confront fresh audiences and new critics. He is metamorphosed, but still my wartime *alter ego*, whom I tried to shape out of a need not only to laugh *at* the mechanical and the life-destroying, but to laugh *with* the incompetently human and the naturally loving and the obstinately life-preserving. Some "critics of the Canadian literary scene" have indeed given me credit for such motivation, and praise for *Turvey* beyond its deserts, but there were not so many when I needed them most, and the steadiest heartening for me has always come from the other Turveys, scattered across this country, recognizing their kin in my novel and in me.

¹ *The Creative Writer*, Toronto CBC Publications, 1967, ch. IV.

² George Woodcock: introduction to *Turvey*, New Canadian Library, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1963.