

A QUALITY OF NEGATIVES

THERE ARE, no doubt, peculiar qualities to Canadian literature. These particularly show themselves in university classes where the students are interested in what has happened in their own country, and in what is happening now. But they, like the literature they examine, look to the future. Somewhere during a course in Canadian literature a student asks me where Canadian literature is going? When will the great Canadian novel be written? When, the great Canadian poem? Rarely does anyone want to play the role of prophet; it is an impossible task. But together, we seem to have tried to answer these questions. What we come up with is a quality of negatives. Because an editorial is naturally limited, to repeat these here is perhaps dangerous because of the generalizations involved.

The fresh, young, and delightful minds with which I work feel that all literature in Canada never quite comes off. When we talk about the better novels, there is always something wrong. Either the plot is too pat, the pace too awkward, the characterization too one-dimensional. They agree that *Who Has Seen The Wind* is a good novel, but they underline this with "of its kind". Admittedly, Mitchell has grasped the quality of the boy and the wind; but the novel does not rank with the great novels written outside of Canada. They like the importance of environment in *As For Me and My House*, but many of the characters are too shadowy, too diffuse. *The Loved and the Lost* has an important theme, but the symbolism is too obvious. Their final evaluation is always tinged with ambivalence; the novelist has tried, has done a good job in many things, but not in all facets of his art; his work never is whole. Some novelists reach for it, but the sustained totality never appears.

These students also try to explain why. Admittedly, often, the explanation is intangible. But through the past five years together we have reached some conclusions for explanations. There is the passionate complacency of the Canadian writer and the Canadian reader, and not the passion usually equated with sex. Everything is taken seriously even by the humourists. At times the complacency becomes smugness, for some writers cry to their readers that they have accomplished something. And because the country has not emerged as a totality, absurd local loyalties to various writers quickly made a distorted pastiche of both value and accomplishment on the Canadian literary scene.

Then there is the more obvious conclusion: the limitation of the imagination and sensibility that makes it impossible for most Canadian novelists to write about sex in any mature or distinguishing way. Perhaps the approach is not even a civilized one. Novels that came out last autumn clearly show this lack, where sex is marked by childish embarrassment or not-so-subtle innuendo. Both novelists and poets have a great deal of learning to do in this area, for a sophisticated approach is needed. Just because more history is made in the boudoir does not mean that most sex is learned behind the barn.

It is a growing literature, but often it is only in a process of germination. There is the occasional writer who reaches beyond this stage at some point in his writing: Morley Callaghan, Adele Wiseman, Phylis Webb. But Canadian writers and readers have only recently decided that complacency must go, and these people are a minority. What is going to happen? Above all, a maturer approach to the human situation is essential, so that completeness in character and conflict emerge. And where is it all going? In comes an age of satire, or, more probable, a romantic revival?

D.S.

