

PHILIP CHILD

A Re-appraisal

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STRONG THOUGH THE COMPETITION MAY BE, the most neglected of good Canadian authors is probably Philip Child. Desmond Pacey devotes three pages of *Creative Writing in Canada* to this "man of good will, of considerable learning and of a fine sense of common humanity" (Toronto, 1961, p. 217), but no study or other short sketch of him exists. The reason for this neglect is simple enough; it is unfortunate timing. Like E. J. Pratt, Frederick Philip Grove, and Morley Callaghan, Child began publishing between the Wars, when serious writers were not in demand in Canada. All interest among readers and most critical attention was going to surviving writers in older modes: to storytellers like Ralph Connor, L. M. Montgomery and Mazo de la Roche, and poetesses like Marjorie Pickthall. Stephen Leacock was a more justifiable pride of the twenties and thirties, but even he was not prized as superior to the traditionalists. Ignoring the older styles of current Canadians, Philip Child strove like Pratt, Grove and Callaghan to make Canadian literature modern. Unlike them he also strove to make it cosmopolitan. Unlike them he aligned himself with no regional outlook in subject matter or closely borrowed technique.

Although Child's work shows his familiarity with the more advanced British novels of the times, from the first it was as original as Pratt's was to become. In those days, originality doomed Canadians to oblivion. Unfortunately for his popularity abroad, his first novel came out at the height of the Depression, when

even well-established writers like Leacock lost ground. Unfortunately for his reputation at home, he published in England, and quietly. His first and best book, the historical novel *The Village of Souls* (1933), received no critical attention in Canada when it appeared. By the time of his second book, *God's Sparrows* (1937) the "Letters in Canada" chronicle had begun in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, and in it Dr. J. R. MacGillivray briefly hailed the novel. Canadians at large scarcely heard of these novels, but it is on them that Child's fame must ultimately rest.

The Village of Souls succeeds remarkably often in the difficult task of externalizing three separate spiritual struggles, all of them struggles with loneliness and love. Yet the plot which provides the framework for this spiritual drama is trite, and even melodramatic. A seventeenth-century voyageur, Bertrand Jornay, is beset by savage and treacherous Indians and half-breeds in the course of his efforts first to protect his white bride, a *filles du roi* named Lys, and later to accept an Indian wife, Anne, who is really a lost white girl. All three are thwarted by the treachery of the villainous Titange, Bertrand's half-breed companion. The adventures include Anne's slaughter of an Iroquois prisoner and Titange's firing of a hut with the women inside. As handled, however, scenes like these are not melodramatic in effect; nor, on the other hand, are they particularly memorable. Much more vivid are the lonely canoe trips through the primeval forest, which open and close the novel. On the opening trip, up river towards Lake Ontario, Bertrand forces himself to expose his loneliness and longing to Lys. Then after they have been separated for most of the novel, she comes to terms with herself as they paddle through a burnt-out wilderness west of Lake Superior. Child brings out well the relief from degradation which both Bertrand and Lys feel after this escape from miserable upbringings in Paris. As each in turn gains spiritual dignity for the first time in his life, each successively realizes a loneliness as intense as the primeval countryside, though by then Lys is hopelessly separated from Bertrand. Anne goes through a similar struggle to break through to Bertrand's love while retaining her inner dignity. In the course of her struggle, Anne becomes the more dynamic woman, as she broods over her vision of her hopes fulfilled, as she thinks about Christianity in a Quebec convent, as she confronts Bertrand at a western mission after his violent seduction of her. Scenes like these show Child's unusual talent for dramatizing emotions. They are the most distinctive and the most successful in his novels.

God's Sparrows achieves — though much less often — a similar success in dramatizing mental turbulence. It also contains the most effective scenes of the

First World War in Canadian fiction. The War becomes the test for the intellectual conflict which opposes two family groups to each other. The Thatchers from New England question the moral implications of everything they do, whereas the Burnets of Southern Ontario look for immediate action, and pleasure. Penuel Thatcher has married a Burnet and is living in the old Burnet mansion with two sons who are similarly at odds with one another. The First World War provides the test supreme for the intellectual opposition. When war breaks out, Pen refuses to pay taxes to support it, at least until he has thought out whether or not it is just, which he never finishes doing. In contrast Uncle Charles Burnet rushes off to the excitement of the front line, and so does Pen's son Alistair. His other son, Dan, agonizes with his doubts just as his father does, but eventually he joins up and fights at the front. His cousin Quentin Thatcher, though fighting bravely at first, continues in a similar mental agony and becomes a conscientious objector in revulsion against the brutality at the front. The scenes which dramatize these spiritual dilemmas are memorable: Pen's refusal to pay taxes, Quentin's humiliation, and Dan's final vision of judgment as to who were right. With the notable exception of descriptions of the front line, the scenes which are not based on the inner torment of the Thatchers seem ephemeral. None of the Burnets on the other hand, is a solid character, and their adventures with the War and with women do nothing to strengthen them. Nor are the scenes in the Burnet mansion vivid, as they should be in a family novel, although in a later narrative poem Child was to visualize well the life of a great house. The slight falling off in Child's second novel is the result of the comparative failure to visualize one of the two families solidly enough in the process of externalizing the central conflict of ideas.

LIKE PRATT, Grove and Callaghan, Philip Child continued publishing in the 1940's, and later too, but unlike them he made no effort to adjust to the literary times in Canada, and he remained cosmopolitan in themes and techniques. His two novels of the decade, *Day of Wrath* (1945) and *Mr. Ames Against Time* (1949), won the two most deserved Ryerson Awards in Fiction, but they both look a little pallid in intensity beside Grove's *The Master of the Mill* or Callaghan's later novels. And although *The Village of Souls* was reissued in 1948 in a Canadian edition and reviewed by Malcolm Ross in "Letters in Canada", it was out of the spirit of the times. It seemed a little remote, like a

message from a strange generation. Philip Child once described the feeling exactly in a lyric of Quentin's in *God's Sparrows*:

The clouds are vanishing, to form
Some other way,
But it was thus I painted
In my day.

Child's collected poetry, *Victorian House and Other Poems* (1951), which is his last publication to date, was hailed by Northrop Frye as one of the few volumes to give new merit to Canadian poetry in the fifties,¹ but it too was not in either of the chief vogues of the times, the sensuous or the visionary. Since the Second World War, Child has made no attempt to follow the new custom among Canadian writers of adopting recent British or American techniques, as Grove for example did in *The Master of the Mill*. He showed no interest in coming to grips with social issues in a recognizably Canadian society as Callaghan was to do in the fifties. And he ignored the renewed interest in Canadian nationalism which has directed so much attention to Pratt's later poetry.

Neither of Child's novels of the forties resembles in type either of the earlier ones. One is a story of racial discrimination, the other an unusual mystery story. Both develop a theme of love, but on a more ethereal level than *The Village of Souls*; this larger theme recurs in the *Victorian House* poems. *Day of Wrath*, the first of the forties' novels, develops the conflict in a Jew of Hitler's Germany between principled devotion to Love and the sore temptation to hate. After losing both wife and daughter to the brutal regime, Simon Froben faces first the chance of killing the Nazi stormtrooper responsible, and later the challenge of rescuing a German orphan. *Mr. Ames Against Time* describes the struggle of a very common man, devoted to Love, against organized evil in the modern city. By practicing and reiterating this Love, Mr. Ames sets out to save his falsely condemned son by unmasking a gang murderer and persuading him to confess.

Both novels exploit Child's distinctive ability to externalize spiritual problems. In the crises noted in *Day of Wrath*, Simon Froben learns what true Love means, what he must and must not do. In *Mr. Ames Against Time*, the cowardly old Mr. Avery shows the depths of spiritual despondence both in his memory of having surrendered military secrets in the First World War and in his quavering fright at Mr. Ames' investigations. The themes are more uncommon than those in the earlier novel, but the scenes that portray them are less credible.

Victorian House, the main piece in Child's collected poems, is a narrative

developed in reverie rather than dramatically. A modern man comes to long for the security of the last generation as he sees an estate agent evaluating in baldly materialistic terms what is in his own view a spiritual treasure. A secondary theme examines once again abstract Love, which, the poem notes, must be large enough to encompass even a Judas. The poem as a whole is melancholy and static rather than optimistic and energetic, as the novels are. The melancholy also dominates the lyrics which conclude the volume of poetry. Most of them are reflections on death, the last one returning to the theme of a Love large enough to forgive Judas.

With such an emphasis on introspection, the characters who linger in the readers' memory are those who ruminate. In *The Village of Souls*, lengthy loneliness has left Bertrand Jornay in a turmoil of conflicting urges. On the one hand he has gained human dignity by himself in the forests, and so for him hell is absence of inner privacy. On the other hand the ambition of his love is the meeting of two souls, his and his woman's and so he also feels that hell is something inescapable within himself. Because Anne's ideas closely resemble these, although she feels rather than formulates them, she emerges more forcefully than does the would-be light-hearted Lys. Both Bertrand and Anne look appealingly human through their sensitivity about revelations even to persons they love, and so does Quentin Thatcher in *God's Sparrows*. Possessive friendship gives Quentin the vigour necessary for the dramatization of his ideas. The moral struggle between right and wrong is convincing in Child's novels, particularly at a personal level. Bertrand's remorse over his violation of Anne, Simon Froben's strangling of his Nazi enemy, Mr. Ames' testimony against his son, provide the memorable moments, when ideas and characters come to life together.

Child's success is limited, however, even in the most memorable characters, and the minor characters succeed even less completely. Although his sombre thinkers can be vivid in static scenes, they show no convincing development. Lys' love is said to become more and more spiritual during her progress through *The Village of Souls*, but in the process her character fades. Nor are Child's personages necessarily made more remarkable by the peculiar traits which the author stresses. Bertrand is repeatedly said to be motivated by pride in his ancestry, but this attitude affects neither his actions nor the plot. Pen Thatcher's idiosyncracies lack credibility because Child finds it difficult to make convincing the larger moral issues with which they are linked. In fact, the considerations of right and wrong stemming from the First World War in *God's Sparrows* never emerge from abstraction. A similar degree of abstraction, without a compensating vigour in

the presentation of the heroes, may explain the comparative failures of Child's two most recent novels. Among his heroines, Anne alone rivals the men as an individual made vivid by inner problems. Most of the minor characters likewise suffer somewhat from a lack of introspection, or from lack of space to develop their ideas, although there are exceptions. The bizarre Russian Dolughoff for instance, who stands naked between the front lines in *God's Sparrows*, dramatizes the thematic opposition of human dignity to war. In *Mr. Ames Against Time*, the frightened old Mr. Avery, with his bitter memory of cowardice in the War, shows the abject servility against which Mr. Ames is fighting in his battle for love among men.

AS WITH CHARACTERS, so with plot; Child can create vivid scenes of static interplay between brooding men and women. Individual vignettes are often haunting. The day-long canoe trip through burnt-out forest in *The Village of Souls*, as Jornay watches Lys die, crystallizes admirably their spiritual crisis. The dead land has the atmosphere of another-world, the jealous Anne threatens the hope for harmony in the canoe, and the prospect of a much-needed cache at the end of the burnt stretch suggests a faint hope. *God's Sparrows* shows the horror of the First World War in the vivid descriptions of the "raped landscape" at the front:

Men had gone to earth there, earth to mud, and trees to splintered stumps. The only living things visible were the guns scattered everywhere, barely discernible in the conquering monotony, and inhabiting the waste like lost spirits in hell. The landscape was significant of nothing, and the significance of mere emptiness was appalling.

Scenes like these are necessary to dramatize the inner agony of thinkers like Dan and Quentin, and the indignity of life in wartime. In contrast, the larger challenge of building a conflict and an atmosphere which would serve a whole novel always baffled Child. Even in his best novels the plots lack at times credibility. The trite discovery of Anne's white ancestry makes *The Village of Souls* seem fantastic; so does the vision of judgment at the end of the generally realistic *God's Sparrows*. Nor is Child always successful even in scenes of smaller scope. Crowd scenes are often vague, like the celebration for a V.C. in *God's Sparrows*,

in which Dan and his crippled sister are caught, or the court room scene in *Mr. Ames Against Time*. The memorable moments in these novels, and they are many, come in scenes with a few characters thinking in isolation from society — in a canoe, a clearing, a room.

A rare objectivity, which always dominates Child's point of view, helps to crystallize these scenes of small scope. It provides a *realism* which contrasts sharply with some of the fantastic general plotting. Because the burning of Mohawks in Montreal is not told melodramatically, it is as helpful to the historical atmosphere as the hard pioneering of *habitant* farmers out in the neighbouring forest. Another result is that evil seems real in these novels. Child draws convincing bad men, from the treacherous Titange of the first novel to the Nazi stormtrooper and the young gangsters of the last novels. Hate is real too. The reader accepts Titange's hate for Bertrand, Anne's hate for Lys, because the reasons for these feelings are so clear.

The control of emotions which this objectivity produces also characterizes the style in both the novels and the poems. Cool rather than impassioned, it provides a useful perspective for the scenes of brooding characters. It runs smoothly enough for storytelling, although it lacks the customary loose flow of easy narration. For moments of emotional intensity, however, it adds little to the mood. Perhaps for this reason Child's lyric poems seem somewhat pallid. Only emotions demanding understatement really benefit from the style, like the reaction to the battlefield in *God's Sparrows*. It is rather a style which lends itself to epigram and humour.

The unity in outlook is provided not so much by the objective point-of-view or by the style, however, as by themes. Ideals are what interest the central characters, and the struggle to understand and preserve ideals consumes most of their energy. Loneliness and the search for love are the motivating urges for both Bertrand and Anne in *The Village of Souls*, and under Bertrand's direction they become Lys' as well. *God's Sparrows*, which stands a little apart from the rest in theme, stresses the moral issues of heroism in war and in doubt about war, particularly when theories are carried to extremes. The resultant attitudes towards war make the novel tighter in structure than most war novels are, or most family novels. Child's last two novels return to the theme of love. In them a larger, more ethereal love than Bertrand's provides a closer unity, although a more abstract one. Extravagance of theme, not disunity, is their difficulty. And in *Victorian House* the recurring idea of a love to encompass even Judas provides the one distinction in the overriding nostalgia of the poem.

Child tells us that only love breaks down the hell of individual isolation and

so makes the individual truly human. The extreme isolation of Bertrand, Lys, and Anne as they paddle through the primeval forest reinforces the even more thorough isolation of each of their souls. Love is the only humanizing outlet. Although Lys rejects this view at first, calling life a jest and longing for the city life of Paris, she recognizes the truth before she dies. Even if "humans are always alone",² love is an expanding and creative force. Privacy, night and self are the most unbearable things in life, and love is the one alternative, a love that is built on faith. And so faith is described as the prerequisite for membership in the human race.³ In this perspective, the Nazi treatment of Jews in *Day of Wrath* becomes a study in inhumanity due to lack of love, and Simon Froben's near tragedy is that he will be corrupted too. Mr. Ames is presumably irresistible in the long run because his lifelong love has made him ideally human. In these last two novels, however, the plight of the hero battling for Love is partly submerged in the welter of city society, which Child does not find easily malleable for storytelling. In contrast the utter loneliness of men, and the union possible through love, are unforgettably set off in *The Village of Souls* as Bertrand, Lys, and Anne pursue their spiritual loves against the atmosphere of disease-ridden villages and the fire-destroyed forest west of Lake Superior.

In all the novels the plot brings about a triumph for the theme, but the mood is never joyous. Melancholy pervades the view of life which Child presents. The happy endings come as hard-earned rewards only to a struggling few. No one, not even Charles Burnet, is convincingly gay. Pathetic minor characters appear in every novel, from Bertrand's tribeless Indian follower, a man with no hope of anyone to love him, to the cowardly Mr. Avery. A cause that contributes to the melancholy mood is materialism which to Child, as to Grove and others, apparently goes with North American civilization. "We are pioneers still, really; and that means materialists", he declares of twentieth-century Ontario.⁴ When the fighting optimism of the novels is lacking, in *Victorian House*, the materialism seems to overwhelm every hope for spiritual comfort. The result is a haunting despair with the modern world, and a less haunting nostalgia for the good old days.

When vitality is missing, Child's weaknesses are the most obvious, and the scenes involving large scope or rapid movement, usually lack vitality. As a result there is neither a continuous awareness of the historic period in *The Village of Souls* nor a convincing recreation of city life in the last two novels. Adventure too seldom moves easily in these novels. This lack of movement applies to characters too, particularly the women; they seldom come fully to life. Child has an

extraordinary grasp of the types and techniques of modern fiction, as the extreme variety in his novels shows. He understands all the conventions and knows how to use them unconventionally. He not only wrote a pseudonymous mystery novel,⁵ but also used the convention with intriguing originality in *Mr. Ames Against Time*. Yet the ambitious themes and large scopes seem to defeat him and rarely achieve credibility. His characters, like his novels and poems, seem to belong to no recognizable culture.

Both as novelist and poet Philip Child is hard to fit into Canadian literature as it is customarily viewed. Other writers of his generation with no more talent have grown out of regional or foreign themes and traditions to become distinctly Canadian since the Second World War. Child has not tried to do so, and in retrospect his novels have that air of being foreign to modern Canada which Hugh MacLennan attributes to his dynamic Canadian hero of the thirties, Jerome Martel, in *The Watch That Ends the Night*. Child's cosmopolitanism has marred both the general and the critical reception of his novels in Canada, but it has no bearing on their ultimate worth. As an historical novelist he saw first and exploited before Pratt the drama of the *Jesuit Relations*. From twentieth-century Canada he has produced the one noteworthy novel of the First World War. Whether dealing with past or present, he sought — like Pratt — to isolate and praise examples of human dignity in a world of materialism which so many other modern writers have called spiritually hopeless.

NOTES

¹ "Poetry", "Letters in Canada 1959", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXIX (July 1960), 458. (Cf. the corresponding article for 1951 for Northrop Frye's full review of the volume, in XXI (April 1952), 252).

² p. 157.

³ pp. 47-48.

⁴ *God's Sparrows*, London, 1937, p. 181.

⁵ *Blow Wind — Come Wrack*, London, 1945 (published under the pseudonym of "John Wentworth").