

# CANADIAN ATTITUDES

## *Pastoral with Ostriches and Mocking-birds*

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**T**HE FOLLOWING REMARKS neither derive from nor imply any feeling of self-exemption. I am addressing myself to what I have to label as “Canadian attitudes”, and especially attitudes of Canadian intellectuals. I suspect that what I say will only exemplify still further the grounds of my complaints: an intellectual complaining about intellectuals makes the complaint seem, to the outside world, not so much a series of reasoned objections as a chronic disease. All the same, I think there is a place for at least some criticism of this kind; and I petition safe conduct by advancing the following thesis: Just as some ideas, and discussion of them, create power — financial, political and technological, so also does the arrival and discussion of other ideas remain a form of self-adjustment bordering on self-consolation. The intellectual, presumably, aims at the pragmatic; he also likes to think for the sake and pleasure of thinking. No wonder, then, that there develops an æstheticism of ideas: a mind-game in which educated people make pragmatic-seeming moves with ineffectual pieces.

It is perhaps unfair to offer French examples to start with, as the French are particularly addicted to mind-games; but at this point I want to clarify rather than be fair. Albert Camus, to name one example, advanced some arguments about Algeria which were intended to promote reforms in the world of practical affairs; perhaps they had some effect at the time. It is hard to tell now. Camus also made a great deal of play with such concepts as “justice”, “*mesure*” and “sunlit thought”; and it is not too cynical to say that he gained as much solace from shuffling these concepts as, say, Keats did from brooding on the Grecian Urn. So what I say about Canadian thinking — and Canadian thinking about Canadian thinking — has to be set against a background of similar mind-games in other countries. Wherever we look, intellectuals are talking away their feelings

of impotence, creating a substitute world of ideas and images, and initiating one another into one another's private mythologies.

There is nothing wrong with this. What worries me is the difference between the self-consolation that keeps on looking outwards — towards the region of probable defeat and unlikely victory, and the self-consolation that attends only to itself. Because we have so little of the former and so much of the latter, and so much of the latter which pretends it is the former, a C. P. Snow has been able to set himself up as intellectual lawgiver asking for a simplified and unstylish businessman's literature, and university teachers of the humanities have gradually developed the odd habit of assuming that literature was created for the express purpose of assisting them to create something of their own: something which can be used for training young people to be good citizens. In other words, to be blunt, I am objecting to the woolly thinking that lets a Snow assume the role of the all-round chap speaking sanely on behalf of decent society, and the humanists' cowardice when confronted with technology. To push things further, I think there is nonsense being talked about what is socially suitable and nonsense being practised on the quiet by academics. The truth is that literature comes into being not to be useful to society; it may *become* useful because it entertains and consoles, but we must not be priggish about that. The intellectual is powerful only so long as he seeks his own kind of power. He doesn't try to fit in. At the same time, because he does not fit in, he must be as honest as he can: he must recognize when he is talking merely to keep alive a needed attitude, when he is talking just for the fun of it, and when he is really trying to get something done. In all these instances he must stick to his own terms and not try to win victories by pretending to be a scientist of letters.

I am asking for, and judging by, two main assumptions. The non-scientific intellectual ought to look outwards without trying to disguise himself by, for example, turning literature into a "respectable" technology and, when he is playing inward games, ought not to flirt with the terminology of activities he has shrunk from. In other words, the non-scientific intellectual must not pose in order to accommodate himself either outwardly or inwardly. In Canada, however, he does both. In the growing universities the study of literature is tending to be increasingly the bestowal of plasma-units and adoption of pedantic jargon. There are the joiners and the stallerers. Both groups turn literature into formulae, sever it from life — from modern life especially although not from modern cant, and are thus damaging the minds and sensibilities of the young. Literature, we too often forget, is not there to be systematized or embalmed; it is there to stimulate

us; and the only excuse for presuming to “teach” it is that it may quicken sensibilities.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that North America is rapidly becoming the wonderland of logology, which is the pseudo-science of turning any lively activity into curriculum. Too many dons are afraid of a living literature; they lament the unfortunate chance that makes poems come out of heads that are morbid, untidy and neurotic. A planned and efficient society would get its literature written by machines; the poems would come out hygienically wrapped with instructions printed on the back: “To be taken once an hour, with one chapter of Northrop Frye”. We could do worse: not everyone shares Mr. Frye’s concern with categories, but he does at least care about new literature and brings to his apprehension of it a lively, civilized and mordant spirit. When we consider the necessarily limited extent to which the academic can participate in a growing literature — because, it seems, there *have* to be syllabuses and examinations — Mr. Frye emerges a rare specimen. Not every university teacher can be expected to write poems or novels, or even to teach modern literature, any more than teachers of history can be expected to perform most of the assassinations or sign most of the treaties. And it is a fallacy to think that the study of, say, Johnson or Swift is in any sense less relevant to today than is the study of, say, Orwell or Snow. But if we are going to study things at all, in universities, in any kind of organized way, in order to set young minds and sensibilities humming, then a responsive teacher will feel obliged to make the ancient modern.

That is the ideal. In practice, however, the study of literature or of history or of politics can quickly degenerate into pattern-making, so that literary study in particular turns into precis-making, trend-spotting, jargon-applying, and so on. Daily, into my mail-box, there come advertisements from American publishers’ Canadian agents: so-called case-books, telling what the critics have said, and explaining not so much how to enjoy a poem as how to “make like” a critic; primers on how to get up poetry for examinations; vast volumes of snippets masquerading as “surveys”. Now there is no harm in information until it begins to lie dead in the attic of a young mind. There is no danger in criticism and interpretation until the young mind becomes confused: that is, loses its own individual response in the blather consequent on the fact that the literary critic is always haunted by the likelihood of his having himself created the poem he praises or claims to understand and of having failed to create the poem he condemns or

<sup>1</sup> “The Fear of Possibility”, *Chicago Review*, Summer, 1960.

finds obscure. At one extreme we have the gullible young, anxious to pass; at the other the professional casuists who either dote on information for its own sake or put theories between the poem and their own inadequacy. We live in a world of increasing professionalism in which the PhD man is respected as being qualified, whereas the amateur who responds acutely to literature is a suspicious, carping misfit. Obviously I am simplifying (I have to in order to keep the discussion within a few pages); there are lively PhD men just as there are dull and incompetent amateurs.

But I cannot help feeling that the attempt to turn English or literary studies into the basic discipline is doing damage. For curricular and examination purposes the work of art as it stands is being made more systematic, more parrotable, more a collection of clear ideas than a complex of gesturing half-truths. Style and enjoyment are being gently shunted aside in the quest for disciplines approved by society. It is refreshing when an Irving Layton or a Harold Town gets up and says Damn society and the fuddie-duddies and the dons and the lit-critters and the committee-men and the Junior Chamber of Wombats. It is refreshing because such abuse not only rebuffs a recipe-minded society but also reminds us that paintings and poems come out of the heads of the living. We find the creative man speaking in his own right, in his own language and with no syllabus in mind. There is no professional parasite getting in between us and the work, between us and the artist. Between Snow's extreme demands for social realism and, say, the Chicago Aristotelians' extreme insistence on categories, the self-respecting artist has little enough chance of being seen plain. He, after all, is the misfit in the world of planned living in which everyone is a professional and everything is explicable by experts. The professionals — including such new professionals as the accountant, have power; and even the professionals of intellect pretend to power: at least, they speak the language of it. It is a sad pretension.

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 N FACT, Canada's academic intellectuals as distinguished from her intellectuals at large have yet to discover their powerlessness except to betray their academic trust. We have only to read, for instance, M. Jean-C. Falardeau's *Plaunt Memorial Lectures* delivered at Carleton University in 1960.<sup>2</sup> M. Falardeau intelligently and urbanely argues against the notion of an integrated Canada only waiting to be equipped with a national flag, anthem and holiday;

<sup>2</sup> *Roots and Values in Canadian Lives*, Toronto University Press, 1961.

but he goes on to identify national diversity with national open-mindedness. He rightly points out that "the dominating trend on our continent towards automation and conformism means that our lives are being taken away from us. We are becoming fossils in a land of plenty which is also a moral vacuum." What he does not seem to realize is the comparative ineffectuality of intellectual protest. No matter how populous the universities may become, no matter how thorough their response to medieval and Renaissance traditions, Canadian pride in material benefits remains loud and gaudy.

It is therefore weird and rather depressing to find M. Falardeau, who is justly sceptical about "the mere evangelical use" of such concepts as "democratic spirit", extolling the concept of *Magister* ("a seeker after truth and a lover of wisdom") and deploring "the forces which would make our universities mere factories" in terms of "dialogue between masters and students" and scholars who are "inner-directed" or "tradition-directed" persons. Such ideas are themselves too prescriptive to defeat prescription. M. Falardeau's mixture of high-flown idealism and hopeful recipe smack of the mind-game, and his dream of bringing forth, "with imagination and conviction, the creative potentialities of classical humanism, rejuvenated by the broad perspectives of the social sciences" sounds as far-fetched as sinister. We all know what the social sciences can do for humanism: suffocate it with prescriptive waffle.

"Classical humanism" will continue to exist in enclaves: the French-speaking universities especially and the learned societies. The average but of course decent guy will always rail at it — just as, in a CBC television series on painting, the lecturer invited along some of his university colleagues to represent the philistine, no-nonsense point of view. According to M. Falardeau's dream, the lecturer, who was good when not oversimplifying and apologizing for things commonplace since 1910, should have been unable to do this. But then, M. Falardeau, chairman of Laval University's sociology department, is really playing a word-game all of his own: "They would also," he says at one point, "bring to the fore the factors which are more potent towards facilitating non-equivocal understanding." Confronted with such wool, it is hard to tell whether the thinking is woolly or not. Canada, he says, is not a datum but a construct; perhaps so; but its only unity is the datum of material prosperity.

His conclusion is odd. He attributes "Canada's growing international prestige" to "lack of biases and prejudices in our dealings with others." Canada, he contends, is prudent but insufficiently dynamic. This is true. But he should have gone on to say that the average Canadian is prudent through indifference and

dynamic because acquisitive. The first elations of materialism have not worn off, but M. Falardeau is already saying "We must de-Westernize our concept of civilization":

How much would we not benefit from re-discovering the sense of harmony and the noble prescriptions of such systems of ethics as those of Confucius, Ashoka, or Buddha which, more than many Western ethnical systems, have insisted on the demands of human dignity!

Try selling that to a commercial sponsor or to a Board of Regents. Ethnics preempt ethics. You cannot wean a child from his newly-begun lollipop by offering him Confucius's carrot. It is true that three Canadian universities have Institutes of Asian Studies, but it is hard to see what impact they can have on the community at large or even on the academic mentality which mistrusts the Elizabethan specialist who suddenly writes a book about Balzac or Oscar Wilde. M. Falardeau sets great store by *paideia*, comparative studies, the polymath, and so on; but these ideals have been cheapened into loose talk about the Two Cultures. It is not subtle synthesis that is recommended, but a jargonizing of the humanities.

M. Falardeau's last sentence soars grandly, and away from humanism: "We should now give to ourselves, and to others, the image of a people whose ambition is not so much to reach the moon, as to transcend our psychological space in order to reach the nations around us, closer at hand, but also better worth loving." Those who prescribe for these loveable people should lower their sights a little: Canada will happen, is happening; an accurate image is safer than a desirable one. Meanwhile, those who shove rebelliously forward according to no sociologist's recipe, will become the real *magistri*, alone among a comfortable pseudo-nation which is waiting to be told how best to be that hypothetical thing: "itself". It is not, alas, even bothering to disagree with such as M. Falardeau.

I CAN BRING my various threads together by referring to Mr. Frye's *By Liberal Things*.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Frye touches on most of the themes I have suggested: idea-savouring; the humanists' capitulation to the technologists; the fact that literature is not fodder for dons or civics or (as it has often been regarded in England) gentleman's relish. Above all, if I understand him rightly, he wants

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, Irwin, 1959.

awareness: awareness of tradition, of community, of modern banality and (in its proper place) of the delights to be gained from exercising the mind and the imagination. He names culprits, singling out for special mention the least mentioned: North American self-satisfaction and "life-adjustment programmes"; and the only remedy is "a readiness to examine and if necessary reconstruct . . . assumptions, an exposing of oneself to new experience in all its irrational force". The awakened, alert mind, as he says, is a dangerous organ; but the intelligent young ought to be able to, ought to want to, live dangerously in that way. Education of the best kind is a leading-out, a teasing-out, and is bound to produce some degree of maladjustment. Most of all, Mr. Frye argues, nothing can take the place of the humanities; there's nothing like leather. "A little learning of science often breeds the notion", he says, "that there are equally assured facts in every area of knowledge . . . But in the humanities there is no final appeal except to humanity itself." Science, on the other hand, avoids controversy, dotes on certainties.

Here is a wisdom we can supply by stopping the humanities from becoming mere crossword puzzles. The new priggishness, which wants education to include more science as well as be more scientifically suited to society, has almost won the day. North Americans have listened to Snow with reverential ignorance based on fear. But surely, if they and their children have to live in a world dominated by science and its reckless exploitation by politicians, then surely the mental and spiritual adjustment they have to make will be better founded on critical intelligence, on a full view of human possibility, than on extra physics lessons. We do not come to terms with human foolishness the better for knowing how bombs explode; and if we want to rebuke and vilify the politicians who drive the scientists, as well as the profiteers who sponsor TV rubbish, then a lively apprehension of mankind — "of mature man as distinct from the childishness immersed in the dissolving present or the senility immersed in the past", as Mr. Frye says, is an essential training. Only our universities can provide it; and the pity is that they are allowing the liveliest objects of study to be tailored by scholiasts and drears. And the young student, discovering that he is human, finds less and less in his studies to engage his own emotions, temperament, dreams and hopes.

We must get more imagination into the teaching (so-called) of the humanities; it is not method we need, or matter: God knows, we already have a surfeit of both. The trouble is that professors of English have a strongly developed economic interest in the writing of literary textbooks. It is high time to let the poets and the painters loose in the universities, even if — by the old curricular standards —

all the students fail. I think it is much more important (and even that word is more earnest, more pompous than I mean to sound) that the students should enjoy their reading; should experience intense streams of irrelevant emotions; should be driven half-mad by what they cannot understand; should become bad citizens because they have understood only too well. None of this will come about as long as the neo-Alexandrians have their cold hands on literature. You have only to go where the Modern Language Association meets: there you will see phalanxes of suited, short-haired literature executives, trading wrinkles about course-phasing and theme-grading and all that highly essential committee-work which keeps the literary industry growing. There they are, skating or hoping to skate on the surface: contriving terms and fallacies and methodologies and dichotomies and footnotes. Few of them would countenance the notion that literature's vital operation is to stain the fingers like nicotine or work mysteriously on the metabolism like radium. Literature cannot be guaranteed to make us feel comfortable or public-spirited; in some cases, if it gets through, it will blast and sicken, undermine and pervert. And yet I would rather have that happen, at that second-hand, and know that it happened to a living someone who could heal himself at the same source than see students, especially at the freshman level, parroting dryasdusts' answers to dryasdusts' questions.

Finally I must try to explain an attitude I call recipe-mindedness. It reminds me of the way in which the Renaissance cult of the classics has for centuries been allowed to stunt and impede the study of literature in English. The difference is that now it is the cult of the scientific which gets in the way. Tabulation of images at ponderous length ousts the general comment based on an attentive, uncounting reading. If it is not Pope's syntax it is Byron's rhyme-patterns. Computer-criticism looms. The two main approaches to literature are sociological and scholarly, and few scholars seem to know why anything is any good. The student quails at this efficient society in which everyone knows what everything is *for*, and he surrenders. No-one tells him about the Softly Softly Catchee Monkey game which is going on. Technology and organizing power and all kinds of other human ingenuities are complicating our daily lives and increasing society's pressure on us. Nobody is a private person now. It is not surprising that for some time creative people have been discarding and perverting such esteemed human inventions as logic, coherence, regular form, clarity, syntax and system. As the organ grinds ever more complicatedly on, the monkey jumps off; but he is shadowed by dons anxious to rewrite his work for him according to these inventions. I am not damning the discussion and comparison of responses; I am just intrigued and disturbed



by the boom in the mind-game. All very well to try putting society right, but there are some things we have to leave to chance and informality. Men can no more implement all their prescriptions than monkeys can play Beethoven.

There is no little vanity in man's pretensions to controlling his world: he not only talks importantly of impracticable theories but by so talking creates new problems for those whose job it is to sustain, at its best, thinking for thinking's sake. Above all, the young student must be told that literature is its own best representative, resists being codified, is no branch of the Civil Service, is not technology and will always betray those who try to twist it into being a descriptive science. Its power is immense; but private, not institutional; and it is only those intellectuals who are themselves out of touch with the raw and teeming life of the continent who have mistaken literature. M. Falardeau on "classical humanism" is flirting with actuality, marrying theory. He neglects the country's lowest Common Denominators. Mr. Frye sees the imagination's indiscipline, is willing to let things get out of hand. M. Falardeau is really undervaluing the humanities, exaggerating what they cannot do by minimizing what they can do. Mr. Frye is asking us to let the humanities remain the humanities: the eloquences of man in his private wondering. More than this they cannot be, and they will only be less when we have ceased to respect them for their endearing vices. We cannot predict what will happen in Canada. But here is a new country, imitating a powerful and experienced neighbour already deft in recipe-mindedness. The temptation to organize even our most private activities, and especially those of the young, is enormous: it becomes easier to compile reports, to explain to politicians, to document for employers. I just hope that the humanists will not go on capitulating. I feel that the study of literature can give the young person private resources unlikely to make him a good salesman, bureaucrat or lawyer; but only so long as it is allowed to *happen to* him rather than be fed into him in measured tablets. In other words there is no room for pseudo-science, for ostriches, for "safe" syllabuses. Or rather, if there is, then only the quiet, clandestine mind-game remains for those who care: those who know that they and their fellows have wasted the only power they ever had; and that is the power of captivating beyond and within the academic timetable by means of an inward operation on the adolescent spirit.