

editorial

THE MUSE OF POLITICS

DURING THE 1940's George Orwell touched in several essays on the deleterious effects which political propaganda could have — and seemed to him to be having at that time — on English language and literature. Contemporary politics, he suggested, deliberately debases the coinage of words, deliberately blurs meaning, deliberately restricts the spontaneity of the imagination — and “unless spontaneity enters at some point or another, literary creation is impossible, and language itself becomes ossified.” On another occasion he claimed that: “Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

Canadian Literature is not a journal of politics, but as a literary magazine it is bound to be interested in the literature of politics as distinct from mere political writing. It is political writing that Orwell attacks; his attack belongs to the literature of politics. If Orwell had been a Canadian, or if some latter-day Milton were to speak out of the prairies in Areopagitan tones on some such subject as the absurdities of the Canadian obscenity laws, we would find what they had to say within our province.

But we have no Orwell and no Milton, and during *Canadian Literature's* two-and-a-half years of existence only one book has come in for review that seemed clearly to belong to the literature of politics. It is Frank H. Underhill's *In Search of Canadian Liberalism* (Macmillan, \$5.00), a collection of essays — some of them remarkable — concerning many aspects of the political past and present in our country.

The poverty of Canadian political writing is one of Professor Underhill's own favourite themes:

Where (he asks) are the classics of our political literature which embody our Canadian version of liberalism and democracy? Our party struggles have never been raised to the higher intellectual plane in which they become of universal interest by the presence of a Canadian Jefferson and a Canadian Hamilton in opposing parties. We have had no Canadian Burke or Mill to perform the social function of the political philosopher in action. We have had no Canadian Carlyle or Ruskin or Arnold to ask searching questions about the ultimate values embodied in our political or economic practice. We lack a Canadian Walt Whitman or Mark Twain to give literary expression to the democratic way of life. The student in search of illustrative material on the growth of Canadian political ideas during the great century of liberalism and democracy has to content himself mainly with a collection of extracts from more or less forgotten speeches and pamphlets and newspaper editorials. Whatever urge may have, at any time, possessed any Canadian to philosophize upon politics did not lead to much writing whose intrinsic worth helped to preserve it in our memory.

Professor Underhill's comment is all too evidently just. It is true that in French Canada the struggle for national identity produced a few writers and a few works that remain in the memory of French-reading people. Bourassa lingers as something more than a mere politician, the Abbé Groulx as something more than a separatist prophet. But in English-speaking Canada, once we have paid customary homage to the melancholy spirit of Goldwin Smith, who is there to acknowledge? What political idealist in English Canada has written a speech or a treatise that can stir the imagination a generation — or even a decade — or even a year — afterwards? We have some excellent biographies of political leaders, but it is the biographies and not the utterances of their subjects that belong to our literature.

Even in a field that has at times been so fruitful in England and France — that of political writing by the engaged novelist or dramatist — Canada has produced nothing outstanding. We have had no Shaw or Huxley or Wells, no Malraux or Camus, or even any writer approaching them in the power to give viable literary form to political ideas. Canadian novelists and poets, writing on politics, become as dull as the experts.

In recent months the advent of the New Democratic Party produced a small freshet of books and pamphlets celebrating the venture. There has been *The New Party* by Stanley Knowles (McClelland & Stewart, \$2.50); there has been *Justice through Power* by Thomas Boyle (Longmans, Green, \$4.50), which approaches

the Party from a trade unionist point of view; there has been *Social Purpose in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, \$4.95), an ambitious symposium by left-of-centre academics who seek a basis of argument and fact on which to found the economic, social and political thinking of a new social-democratic movement in Canada.

Rarely in these books does one find the inspired touch that characterised, for example, the literature which accompanied the early social movement in England during the 1880's and 1890's. There is none of the golden eloquence that comes from passion and artistry combined. One chews disconsolately at sentences like these:

Even at a time when it is accepted that change is the order of the day, Canadians hold fast not only to their belief in democracy, but to the conviction that in and through the workings of our parliamentary system we can build a society that will preserve freedom, achieve a high level of economic development, establish security, and provide for the educational, social, and cultural development of our people.

(Stanley Knowles in *The New Party*.)

The dynamic force that seems to be the main source of the creative and constructive changes that are manifesting themselves in these emerging countries is nationalism.

(H. Scott Gordon in *Social Purpose for Canada*.)

The mental palate is clogged, and not only with the suetty texture of the prose. There is an almost obsessive tendency in almost all these writers to deal in abstractions to such an extent that one completely loses sight of the individual men to whom all this good is to be done and of the concrete earth on which they live.

In this respect Mr. Boyle's *Justice through Power* is somewhat better than the other books. Mr. Boyle has been both a teacher and a worker on the bench; he has the kind of abundant general knowledge which suggests an old-fashioned education through copious reading, and he can alternate reminiscences of factory life with apt quotations from Cicero and Rabelais. He sees the world a little romantically, and indulges in Sorelian panegyrics on perpetual conflict as the desirable state for society; he is not afraid of his own prejudices and frequently gives them their head. The result of all this is that he not only presents an idea, which we can accept or reject; he also projects the temperamental image of a man who holds that idea with a great deal of feeling because he has reached it through thought tempered by much experience.

Mr. Boyle may not have produced the best of political literature, for individual talent in the end determines quality, and he may not make many converts for the New Party. But he writes on the right track; he talks about men and not about stereotypes. And here, perhaps, is at least one of the qualities that mark off the literature of politics from mere political writing. The best political prose writer is as conscious as a novelist that he is dealing with people in a real and tangible world, and he never gets far away from that vision. Thomas More, William Morris, John Ruskin, Shelley, Shaw — how anxious they were to keep before their mental eyes the image of life going on in a believable landscape — and how rarely they fell into the trap of relying solely on the abstractions of political theory, of thinking of Man instead of men. Some of their kind might imbue our political life with the vision that is necessary if Canada is to accept the moral responsibilities the age now offers, and offers no one knows how briefly.

