

THE BRIDGE OR THE STOKEHOLD?

Views of the Novelist's Art

Ethel Wilson

These remarks on the novelist's attitude formed the substance of a talk which Ethel Wilson delivered as part of a symposium sponsored by the Humanities Association in Vancouver in January, 1960.

OUR SUBJECT is Canadian Literature, and you will be justified in saying, "She did not talk about Canadian Literature." And I shall be justified in saying, "Oh, yes, I did, really. I talked about an approach to making it."

These remarks should, I believe, have a bearing on Canadian novels. It would be easier to talk about Samuel Hearne's journeys, or Donald Creighton's life of Sir John A. Macdonald, or Miss Neatby's fine formidable book on education, or Margaret Ormsby's *History of British Columbia*, or Charles Camsell's *Son of the North*, or Roderick Haig-Brown's books about waters, and fly-fishing, or R. M. Patterson's *Dangerous River*, or Wallison's *Place Names of British Columbia*, or James Gillis's naively solemn and funny *Cape Breton Giant*, and others, with pleasure and detachment.

But in the matter of Canadian novels I have to choose between two positions—detachment and involvement. They are separate and different. Detachment is the easier position (that is, to some extent, your position), but I have to choose involvement.

Turning to my private addiction, writing, I am not consciously aware in my personal act of writing (how could one be?) of "the Canadian novel" or "the English novel" or "the American novel", as the critic or the critical reader must be aware, and as I am aware when I transfer

to the position of the critical reader. When I think of the universal yet private and, I hope, critical approach as a working writer to this novel itself, the happier I am—free, and devoid of personal or national self-consciousness, which is the way I like it. Self-consciousness is a triple curse. But in retrospect I see my Canadianness, for example, in that my locale in a sustained piece of writing (that is, in a book) has to be British Columbia. There are other places in the world that I know and love, but none that I know, and feel, and love in the same way. But I did not choose it. It chose. It is very strong.

If one moves over from the place of the person engaged in this particular act of writing to the place of the person on the bridge looking at the view and interested in “the” Canadian—or any other—novel, I assure you that your view from the bridge (which I also enjoy enormously when I am there) differs from the view in the stokehold where the stoking goes on. I should like to talk, a little, from the stokehold. Let us consider one childishly simple yet eternally complex question—from what place do people in a work of fiction (the “characters”) arise, swarming like moths from the dark into the area of light, illuminated by that novel? The question is at once universal and particular, whether one is a West Indian or a Canadian.

Character and plot are a kind of chicken and the egg, depending on the writer. Happily, the material and structure and population of a novel lie within a writer’s ambience and choice, unlike history where the question of technique and approach would always baffle some of us; but this private piece of work, when finished, may take a place in a national literature as a Canadian novel, if the natural infusion is strong enough, and if it is good enough, or bad enough. It is a sort of distillation of the writer. I shall try to present, briefly, considerations of origins of “characters” that seem valid to myself. The first examples come from two great writers outside our time and place, and none the less valid for a Canadian writer.

In the second introduction to the novel *Victory*, Joseph Conrad states with simplicity the natural way in which he first comes to know his characters (which then take shape in a world which is both his inner world and an outside world), and it is a way that I understand and believe in. A novelist is, no doubt, a born watcher. He may not be as planned and deliberate as a bird watcher, yet he cannot help watching.

The great writer Conrad, a small man of sombre mien, walks along the quayside or sits down at a café table, and he watches. That watching, passive as it is, is also an actively functioning part of anyone who in some degree becomes a novelist. Conrad observes a man, a woman (never to be seen by him, perhaps), and that man, that woman, is his. There may not be a studied imitation, but there is a sort of active principle at work, a union. He sees a look and perhaps only a look—yet what is more powerful than a look?—or the abstraction in a look, even; and the woman who looks will live and breathe and feel and speak and take her part in some future story (in *Victory*, it may be) and become a person who affects him, and us, deeply. Her actions will be implicit in that look and will somehow derive from the same source, whatever that same source may be. Even her death will derive from it. That look lights a slow fire in the writer Conrad who—observe—is a Pole but writes as an Englishman.

Further, much further, went Marcel Proust. Towards midnight Proust, a very sick man, muffled up, arrives at the house of old friends whom he has not seen for a long time—M. and Mme. de Caillavet who have a young daughter Simone. I quote from Maurois' *Life of Proust*:

“Madame, what I ask of you now is that I should be permitted to see Mlle. Simone tonight.”

“But Marcel, she has been in bed for ages!”

“I implore you, Madame . . .”

Simone was brought downstairs . . . What was it he hoped to find in her? The impressions that he needed in order to paint the portrait of Mlle. de Saint-Loup, the daughter of the woman whom the Narrator had once loved.

You and I can see those large dark eyes mournfully exploring the face and demeanour of the young girl. We see him returning in haste to his room. But Proust sometimes blended many persons. In his own notes he says: “(Félice—a certain Marie—another old servant from the Illiers days—Françoise).”

Proust is not wholly in fashion now, although book succeeds book about this enigmatic man. Perhaps too much has been said. His reputed colossal faults do not concern me at all. His achievements do, very deeply. What has he to do with Canadian Literature? He has to do with our universal master and servant Time, and with people moving in Time.

A novelist may be exposed to the temptation of portraying some tantalizing intimately known person. If the novelist yields to this temptation and turns this person loose into his book, he may produce a better book than he could otherwise have done, but at the high cost of peace of mind. Not so, naturally, if the work is planned as a commemoration of love, or an explanatory or affectionate commentary. There is a temptation which I can only describe as excruciating; for truth is far far stranger than fiction or may be much more interesting, and who knows the temptations? I do.

My own experience, which is not great but varied enough for reference, indicates to me the curiously wide spread or narrow concentration of influence in the origins of stories and characters. A novel of mine, or its main character, grew directly from a few words dropped almost at random in a previous book. The words were, “. . . formed other connections.” What connections? I had never seen and did not know the girl in question. She did not exist in my knowledge any more than a fly in the next room, but I considered certain aspects and likelihoods, and wrote a book called *Lilly's Story*. On the way, characters multiplied, their outlines at first dim, later clear. I cannot imagine willingly employing even a marginal character without knowing his outside appearance so well that he could be identified in the street by myself and for my own purposes.

Speaking still of people in a book, there comes the influence of light, which may change everything. There was, lately, a freighter which, surprisingly, came to anchor very close to shore and just below our study windows. It caused me intense and daily pleasure. On a grey evening, the ship was a lovely ghost. On a fine morning the freighter was dazzling white where the sunshine fell and the silver gulls flew over. The light faded, and the ship became a dirty tub. The ship was the same ship; the light was different; its effect was perhaps false. Upon us all, light falls, and we seem to the beholder to change; and upon the impending work of the novelist, light falls, and changes a scene and the people in a room. In the book *Victory*, a false light falls upon the man Heyst and its effect is lethal.

Somewhere, I think, the person in a story must touch not only the constructive imagination, but also the earth (that is to say, the writer's own experience) in the course of the struggle, and receive life and strength

from that earth.

There is a skilful writer who seldom presents visual characters. They present themselves through the medium of conversation. Yet a character occasionally rises into view, like the body of a seal showing through a breaking wave. Here is Bullivant: "Bullivant relaxed his bearing and turned towards Horace almost with a smile, being adept at suggesting a facial movement without executing it." That is not much; but we see plainly that below the wave, where the writer's mind exists, there is Bullivant and his unsmiled smile.

It seems to me that the problems of the stoker (or the craftsman, or the artist) are universal, for people who are writers are first writers, and then they are Canadian writers, Polish, French, Russian, English writers. I understand so well what the Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler said when he was asked, "Are you a Jewish writer or a Canadian writer?"

He answered, "Neither. I am a writer." Yet he is a Canadian writer, and so am I.

Early Canadian Printing

The probable author of the verses reproduced on the following page is William Brown, founder, printer and editor of the *Quebec Gazette*, a bilingual weekly newspaper that appeared first on June 21, 1764. Broadsides such as this appeared some years in French, some in English, and were distributed annually to the hundred or so subscribers within Quebec City.