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# CANADIAN LITERATURE N<sup>o</sup>. 54

*Autumn, 1972*

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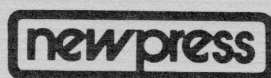
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## CANADIAN LITERATURE

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## LIMITS OF TASTE AND TOLERANCE

SINCE THE BEGINNINGS of *Canadian Literature* we have been concerned about the censorship of books. In our second issue, in Autumn 1959, I devoted an editorial —“*Areopagitica* re-written” — to the laws relating to obscenity which in that year were passed in both Britain and Canada. The conclusion of that editorial was that while the British legislation was an obvious advance on anything in the past, the Canadian legislation was at best ambiguous and at worst oppressive. While praising the British legislation for its provision for a consideration of the literary, scholarly or artistic merits of any work involved in a prosecution, I also remarked:

It is this writer's personal opinion that censorship of any kind is morally unjustified and practically self-defeating. It places a premium on obscurantism and intolerance, it lowers the climate of social relations by encouraging the sneak and the informer, and it places works of literature at the mercy of policemen, customs officers, magistrates and judges whose training does not often include the inculcation of artistic discrimination.

But, admitting a situation such as existed in 1959, when large numbers of people obviously still supported “some degree of governmental interference in the freedom of publication”, I took the position that to be realistic we must accept a compromise that would protect works of genuine literary merit; what I objected to in the legislation as it then stood was that it assured no such protection.

Events have led me to the conclusion that the argument on grounds of literary merit in fact provides a false position from which to criticize censorship laws; only the absolutist libertarian view, as Milton stated it, stands up to examination and is effective in practice.

Let me narrate the incident that led me to this conclusion. Recently I received a letter from a lawyer in eastern Canada who was preparing the appeal of a group of book store clerks who had been convicted on obscenity charges. The defence would involve three types of expert testimony — testimony on changing community standards of tolerance, medical-psychiatric testimony on the effects of pornography on behaviour, and testimony on the literary nature of “the paperback novels which are the subject matter of this appeal.”

I was invited, with just over two weeks’ notice, to provide the testimony “on literary merits” regarding some “dozens of novels”. I was not given the titles of these novels, though I was given a single sheet of summaries prepared by a professor of English in a Maritime university which left no doubt of the kind of books they were. I was expected to decide in a couple of days, before I had seen a page of the books concerned, whether I would deliver the appropriate opinions. It would of course have been impossible to give conscientious testimony in such circumstances, and I declined the invitation. But I remained interested in two sentences from the lawyer’s letter, which revealed to me as nothing before had done the weakness of the defence of any work merely on aesthetic merits. He told me that the professor who read the books “feels that this material appeals to a segment in the community, of lower intellect and education. The point is that this material says something to them — it is their choice of literature.”

Obviously the critic cannot defend on aesthetic grounds books which are someone else’s “choice of literature” but which he considers rubbish, as I suspect I would have found the books I was asked to defend. True, in this case a particularly gross form of relativism was applied by the lawyer and his consultant professor, but it had the effect of making me more aware than before of the element of relativism that enters any defence of the literary merits of a work in a non-literary environment like a court of law. Does not the very setting tend to distort our view on such matters? Does it not often become a we-and-they situation in which we tend to make a false judgment of a work just because it is threatened?

When one remembers some of the works that have in the past aroused impassioned defences on the part of men of letters, it is obvious that many of them were not works of high literature at all. *Madame Bovary*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*,

*Ulysses*: no doubt exists in those cases, to be sure. But does it not now seem absurd that in the excitement of the moment good critics found aesthetic merit in a bad banned book like *The Well of Loneliness* and regarded Frank Harris's shoddy and senile *My Life and Loves* as a persecuted literary masterpiece? Have not Henry Miller's books steadily and rightly faded in prestige ever since they ceased to be contraband? And could not one even say that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* gained prominence at the expense of Lawrence's better books because he was the centre of a *cause célèbre* which brought the critics flocking to defend it?

No defence of books against censorship that is based on aesthetic grounds can fail to produce such distortions, and lead critics by the emotions of the situation into untenably relativistic judgments. I am therefore now convinced that the only effective and logical argument against censorship is the absolute libertarian one. We have to return to Milton. We have to say — but this time without qualification — what I said in these pages in 1959, that “censorship of any kind is morally unjustified and practically self-defeating.” If we demand freedom of publication for *Beautiful Losers* and *Cocksure* we must allow freedom of publication for bookstall pornography (which, like cesspools, may have its own social value), but this does not mean that we must accept both as literature or that we can defend any “choice of literature” but our own.

\* \* \*

I N RECENT YEARS the range of scholarly tools for Canadian writers has been immensely extended, largely through the enterprise of the University of Toronto Press. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, to whose monumental merits we have repeatedly drawn attention, is only the most notable of these achievements; other compilations which have been of more specialized use to students and critics of writing in Canada also deserve attention. Apart from the *Literary History of Canada*, a work of massive scope and disturbing unevenness, the most ambitious has undoubtedly been the *Check List of Canadian Literature and Background Materials*, compiled by R. E. Watters. The great merit of this work, whose original version — published in 1959 — covered the period from 1628 to 1950, was that, while limiting himself to works in English, Watters took Canadian literature to mean writing by Canadians wherever it was printed, and thus, by diligently pursuing the *Check List's* various divisions of subject and genre, one is likely to find all a writer's works listed and not merely those which have found publication in Canada. A new edition of the

*Check List of Canadian Literature*, bringing its coverage up to 1960 and repairing the rare omissions in the earlier version, is due for publication this autumn. Unfortunately it has not arrived in time for detailed consideration; it will be fully noticed in our next issue.

The comprehensiveness of the Watters *Check List* makes one regret the limitations of two other important bibliographical works recently issued by the University of Toronto Press, limitations which are deliberate in the case of Harald Bohne's *Canadian Books in Print* (\$25.00) and evidently accidental in the case of Douglas Lochhead's *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* (\$20.00). Both of these books — which have the advantage of dealing with publications in French as well as in English — are immensely useful so far as they go, but they are not the completely reliable tools their titles might lead one to expect.

The fault of Harald Bohne's handbook is illustrated in the ambiguity of its title. What are we to expect from *Canadian Books in Print*? Surely with most reason a list of books by Canadian authors which are now in print no matter where they were published. Books by Canadian authors are my idea of Canadian books, but not, quite evidently, Harald Bohne's idea; he is concerned strictly with books *published in Canada*, even if this merely means a Canadian distributor putting his imprint on a book actually brought out by a foreign publisher and which has no other link with Canada. So we have the extraordinary anomaly that, while works by non-Canadians as varied as William Godwin, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler and Iris Murdoch appear as "Canadian books in print", books by Canadian authors that were published abroad and are still in print are rigorously excluded. To give a very personal example, out of twenty of my books which were in print in 1971, only the nine actually brought out with Canadian publishers' imprints are included, although the rest were in fact available in Canada in that year. Does that make half my books Canadian and half non-Canadian? To be an effective scholarly tool rather than a mere showcase for local publishers, a handbook entitled *Canadian Books in Print* should be devoted to books by Canadians *wherever* they are in print and should leave out books by non-Canadians even though by some accident they bear a Canadian imprint. This book has a considerable usefulness, but it will only become as useful as it should be when one can open it and see at a glance what, among a Canadian writer's book-length works, can be bought in the year of compilation.

The criticism that this is something useful which might be improved applies also — though in a different way — to Lochhead's *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies*. Here there is no fault in defining the field, but there is — in this

second (1972) edition — a failure of thoroughness in bringing information up to date. In judging reference books I have always followed the rule of turning first to the items of which I have some close knowledge; the encyclopaedia one finds making mistakes in one's own field is to be used with circumspection, though not necessarily to be rejected.

In the case of the *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* I looked up four references which concerned features that had appeared in *Canadian Literature*. Only one was complete and even then there was an uncorrected spelling change ("Theater" for "Theatre", as if the American hordes were already among us!). Our annual Checklist of Canadian Literature was entered as if Inglis F. Bell had edited it consistently from 1960 to its demise last year; no note was made of the fact that Rita Butterfield was editor from 1964 onwards or that the French section was edited during the same period by Susan Port and then by Pamela Piddington. There is an entry for our Index, but only the section up to No. 12 is noted, despite the fact that by the time this edition of the *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* was prepared two further indexes had appeared, together reaching No. 36. And, while Earle Birney's Bibliography of Malcolm Lowry in No. 8 and the supplement in No. 9 are included, Birney's second supplement in No. 19 is ignored. Now, if I find failings in three-quarters of the entries of whose subjects I have close knowledge, how am I to proceed with confidence as I look up Mr. Lochhead's references in areas where my knowledge is notably less? Perhaps, as he stresses, one cannot include in such a book an entry for every bibliography of every kind, but at least those which are included should give full and correct information. Yet, for all its flaws, this is the only reference book of its kind, and it brings together a mass of useful information not collected anywhere else. One can only hope that, when the third edition appears, flaws of the kind I have mentioned will be eliminated.

A different kind of reference book, frank about its omissions and somewhat unashamedly didactic in its intent, is *Read Canadian* (James Lewis & Samuel, \$1.95), a compilation of essays and booklists edited by Robert Fulford, Dave Godfrey and Abraham Rotstein, three avowed nationalists of various viewpoints anxious to provide Canadians with some starting point for an appreciation of their country's literature. Scholars of uneven capabilities write essays of uneven quality on 29 categories of literature (some of them very restricted in a modish way, like *Drugs and Women*), and on the whole the coverage is fair. Hundreds of useful or important books are discussed, and a few of the authors, like Walter Young, Richard Simeon, W. H. New and Dennis Lee manage in these difficult

circumstances to write essays of literary quality. Dave Godfrey and James Lorimer discuss the problems of publication in Canada and there is a list of Canadian publishers untainted by foreign initiation or control.

Every review I have seen of *Read Canadian* has noted the omissions in its coverage, and certainly they exist, in terms of books and authors missed and whole fields of study left out, but I do not propose at this stage to add to the list, since this does not pretend to be a comprehensive book and the editors have promised to fill out the pattern and be more comprehensive in later editions. Also, it is, after all, an introduction for the uninitiated. Those who are already modestly versed in the imaginative, historical and sociological literature of our country will find little that is unfamiliar, but the book is not aimed at them. It is aimed at people like Robert Fulford's young writer who went through high school and university in western Canada and never in the process even heard of Sinclair Ross's prairie classic *As for Me and my House*. As such a venture — the first of its kind — it is to be welcomed and its editors are to be congratulated.

G.W.

# NOTES ON THE CANADIAN IMAGINATION

*David Stouck*

WHILE IT IS THE SPECIAL FUNCTION of the imagination to make us more fully aware of life's potentialities, the Canadian imagination has traditionally been obsessed with the limitations rather than the possibilities of human experience. The imagination allows us momentarily to see the world differently, shaped not by economics and politics, but in accordance with man's deepest anxieties and wishes. Most positively it gives us a glimpse of life lived with a sense of greater freedom and a fully expressed individuality, for at the centre of every imaginative response, buried however deeply, is a vision of human existence liberated erotically. Canadian art, however, seldom directs us to the fulfilment of this vision; rather it accepts life's limitations and finds ascetic pleasure within their circumference.

Part of the reason for this, we must assume, is climate and geography, for these have historically made survival rather than freedom the great fact of Canadian life. The contrast to the American experience is suggestive. Men went to the United States seeking freedom and the opportunity for unlimited individual power; they sought to re-capture that Renaissance condition where each man was potentially able to realize his broadest ambitions. This vision was reinforced by the unlimited physical frontier. Though much of the United States is geographically and climatically as forbidding as Canada, the American imagination has always responded to the idea of America as a geographical whole and has not been limited to the intemperate conditions of one region. With its Mississippi winding into the warm South, and the Western plains sweeping across to the mountains and the promise of California, the American landscape has always provided an escape route from the specific limitations of "home"; and American



art has received its special character from this dynamic urge to growth and unceasing condition of movement. In Canada there is little comparable movement possible; Canadians may journey thousands of miles within their country but they remain physically in the north.

Men came to Canada for very different reasons. Where they had gone to the United States to escape tradition and build individual empires, they came to Canada seeking a place in which to preserve those traditions threatened at home. The United Empire Loyalists who settled in the Maritimes were largely educated, conservative men who had not joined in the Revolutionary cause and who sought a haven in Canada for their way of life and their values. In less obvious fashion the same was true of many of the settlers who came from England in the nineteenth-century seeking an economic and social preserve. Rather than suffer the eroding effects of increasing poverty in England, large numbers of middle-class English and Scots (the "genteel" poor) came to Canada where through better economic opportunities their station in life might be saved. The Strickland family is a typical as well as significant example. Imaginatively Canada has not been conceived of as a land of opportunity so much as a refuge from aggressive or debilitating forces elsewhere. The French response to Canada has been similar to the English, symbolized dramatically in the fortress city of Quebec — the refuge on the rock. Much less even than the English have French-Canadians had the desire to explore and expand over the continent. The Canadian winter is a fact formidable to French and English alike.

A sense of limitations, then, both physical and emotional, has determined the character of the Canadian imagination from the outset. Northrop Frye has designated this our "garrison mentality", referring specifically to the Canadian preference for staying at home rather than "lighting out for the territory". This response to the Canadian landscape — the reluctance to set forth, the holding fast to what is known and safe — makes it possible to define a tradition in Canadian art. It is a quality of response which on its outer limits suggests fear, but at its core makes us cherish what is domestic and secure, however humble and small. It finds its essential expression in such varied works of the imagination as Susanna Moodie's journals, the sonnets of Archibald Lampman, the painting of Ozias Leduc, F. P. Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*, the music of Claude Champagne, Ross's *As For Me and My House* or the Manitoba novels of Gabrielle Roy. In Mrs. Moodie's journals it is an emotion not yet transformed into art; in the work of subsequent artists it not only defines the content of their art but also the very style by which expression is achieved.

TWO IMAGES dominate Canadian art. Not surprisingly one of these is nature in both its foreboding and its bleak aspects. A sense of nature's turbulence and destructive power is visually striking in such paintings as Tom Thomson's "Approaching Storm" and F. H. Varley's "The Elements", and is dramatically central to such fiction as *Maria Chapdelaine*, Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, Sinclair Ross's "The Lamp at Noon"; its latent hostility is a felt presence in the grim winter lyrics of Wilfred Campbell and Margaret Avison. Similarly the unrelieved bleakness of the northern landscape — the snow-covered expanses, the grey wintry sky — is an integral part of Canadian art. A heavy melancholy broods over the landscapes of A. Y. Jackson; it assumes a delicate, refined form of sadness in the canvases of J. W. Morrice (see for example "The Woodpile"), and wears a grim, stoical mask in the Arctic landscapes of Lawren Harris. The latter have been interpreted musically by Harry Freedman in his *Images* with a similar feeling of oppressive gloom. The imprisoning monotony of the landscape weighs heavily on Mrs. Moodie and on the characters in Ross's *As For Me and My House*, and is part of that sadness felt by the poets of Tantrammar and Grand Pré. It would seem then that the landscape, harsh or bleak, is the cause of the artist's isolation and loneliness; Northrop Frye implies this in all his writing about Canadian art. Yet surely this is to belie the most fundamental observation we can make about the nature of the imagination: namely, that its very existence derives in a profound way from the artist's sense of alienation from his fellow man. From the troubadour onwards the artist has been traditionally identified as an outsider. The artist's struggle is never really with nature, but with his own divided self and with the society from which he is separate. In the tradition of Romantic art the physical landscape in Canada becomes a projection of the artist's isolation, an objective correlative for his experience of fear, sadness and the challenge to endure.

The other recurrent image is that of the humble dwelling, the human refuge from the austere landscape and the elements. The simple cottage hearth redolent of warmth and domestic security is at the emotional centre of much Canadian art. The cottage with wife and child assures McCulloch's Stepsure that his conservative way of life is best; it awaits Grove at the end of each journey over "prairie trails". The little dwelling huddled on the landscape is almost a convention in the painting of the Group of Seven. Again a dialectic would appear to exist between the human presence and the desolate indifference of nature (certainly these two forces do define each other), but it is not so simple, for that

image of the humble cottage is essentially a pastoral and escapist one. It does not represent the true arena of the artist's endeavour, for he is neither explorer nor pioneer. His struggle is not with a stubborn wilderness, but with the complex tangles of human emotions.

No genuine imaginative conflict exists then between man and nature in Canadian art; rather the conflict is between the artist and a force which most frequently lies outside the circumference of his art. Those two images which would appear in conflict — the austere landscape and the small abode — are both projections of the artist's sense of isolation and his desire to retreat from the larger world. This is evident in the style of A. Y. Jackson's paintings where the wavy lines of structure enclose both buildings and landscape in soft, unifying folds. Similarly the imaginative tension in *Over Prairie Trails* derives not from a conflict between the narrator and the forces of nature on his rides (indeed his delight in the weather and his keen observations of the landscape and the seasons are one with his delight in seeing wife and child again), but from a source of anxiety seldom referred to by the narrator — his ambition and his frustration in society. Much of his pleasure on the trails seems to lie in his escaping the unsatisfactory world of his school and teaching, perhaps in retreating from the world as a whole which rejected the once hopeful young artist. Like the English Romantic writers (particularly Wordsworth, who greatly influenced the Confederation poets) many Canadian artists have sought to escape the fretful world of the city and "the sneer of vain and selfish men". Tom Thomson and several of the Group of Seven went on long expeditions into the northern woods to work; Emily Carr journeyed hundreds of miles up the British Columbia coast and found companionship with the Indians whose villages she painted. They all sought a simpler, more primitive world in which to work, a pastoral retreat from the painful complexities of contemporary society. The growth of a Canadian musical identity was similarly fostered in the 1920's by the rediscovery of the folk song; it is an integral part of the music of Canada's most accomplished composers including Hector Gattson, Sir Ernest MacMillan and particularly Claude Champagne.

The quest for pastoral retreat, however, renders Canadian art non-dramatic, for the source of conflict remains outside the canvas or just off the page. The wooded landscape with its cottage, the Indian village or the folk song, do not describe the artist's struggle but his retreat; the imaginative drama is often only implied by the nature or mood of his withdrawal. In a country where physical survival has been the foremost reality, men of necessity have controlled rather

than expanded their emotions and the highly dramatic has always struck a false note in Canadian art (e.g. Grove's prairie farmers assuming Shakespearian gestures). Perhaps this is why there has traditionally been so little Canadian theatre. The expenditure of human energy in emotional conflict has never been conducive to the survival of the garrison.

In this light Susanna Moodie's pioneer journals can be seen as embodying the raw materials out of which the Canadian imagination has taken shape. When Mrs. Moodie and her family came to Canada in the 1830's (to salvage their dwindling fortunes and social dignity), Ontario was crude bush country and survival foremost in the minds of even its most educated English settlers. The image of nature as a hostile force recurs frequently throughout the journals; wild animals, fire, bitter cold, destructive rains take up much of the day to day concerns of the journals. The log house—the humble dwelling in the backwoods—evolves accordingly as an emblem of refuge from these threatening forces. But physical survival does not comprehend the full drama of Mrs. Moodie's journals. Her first emotion on reaching Canada is homesickness for England, but that emotion is soon qualified by a sense of having been rejected by the "mother country", and she views Canada with gratitude for giving her family a second chance. The scene along the St. Lawrence suggests to her "a second Eden", and her first steps ashore lead to a quiet copse by a little river, sheltered away from the crowds. But Canada with its rough, commonplace inhabitants is socially no more of a solace than England. Mrs. Moodie's pride alienates her from her crude neighbours, and only in the isolation of the backwoods, despite all its physical hardships, can she find respite. Mrs. Moodie ultimately sings praise of her home in Canada, but her eulogy begins significantly after she has discovered the wilderness to be not her antagonist, but the harsh companion of her loneliness. Mrs. Moodie's personal drama of rejection and exile, and her search for an emotional refuge from an uncaring world is very central to what is imaginative in the Canadian experience.

**N**ORTHROP FRYE points to a distinctively Canadian poetry developing in the long narrative poem rather than in the brief lyric. The poets in this tradition trace their descent down through Heavysege, Mair, Isabella Crawford, D. C. Scott, Pratt and Birney. For Frye the experience which these poets share and which welds them into a continuous and distinctly Canadian tradition is that sense of God's disappearance and of man's being left alone to

face an indifferent, if not hostile, nature in a primitive country. This vision is central to the narrative conflict from Heavyside's wolf, howling in answer to Jephthah's prayer, to the "sun and incurious clouds" which alone mark the destruction of Birney's David. But the question here is whether these poems in which man does battle with nature are genuinely dramatic. If we understand "dramatic" to mean conflict whose ultimate goal is erotic liberation (Frye himself assumes this definition in his classic study of Blake), then the struggle with nature as an external force is no more dramatic than the escape into nature for refuge from man.

Of the early narrative poets only Isabella Valancy Crawford realizes something uniquely imaginative in her verse. The matrix of her poems is the rhetoric of nineteenth-century romanticism with its sentimental philosophical assumptions, and yet there is a vigour and a virile incisiveness in her style (most striking in individual images and phrases such as "the small ponds pouted up their silver lips" or "to the feast / They flocked with the beaks of unclean crows") which renders that rhetoric the perfect vehicle for her imagination. For Miss Crawford clearly did not seek in her verse to devalue the romantic myths of the nineteenth-century; rather she sought within their framework to release into expression an essentially masculine energy and temperament. In almost all of her poems Miss Crawford's narrator is a lonely male figure (in suitable accordance with literary convention) whose love can never be fulfilled. However, it is difficult to describe Miss Crawford's narrative poems as fully dramatic; "Malcolm's Katie" is essentially an idyll — a kind of fairy tale poem — in which against great odds the much beleaguered hero wins his true love, while "Old Spookses' Pass" is a dialect cowboy poem describing a stampede of cattle in the Rocky Mountains.

Duncan Campbell Scott, whose imagination is almost solely preoccupied with death, dramatizes his obsession entirely in terms of an external struggle with nature. Scott's narratives are technically among the most sophisticated of Canadian poems; in the juxtaposition of brief, simple scenes the narratives move swiftly and relentlessly to their inevitable conclusions, the ruthlessly selective style being a consummate expression of the implacable emotion in the poems. In "At the Cedars", the log jam which breaks free takes with it, in a few short stanzas, the lives of the young man and of the girl who rushes after him in a canoe. In "The Forsaken", Scott juxtaposes the young Indian mother, sacrificing her own flesh to obtain food for her child, with the scene many years later in which her grandchildren leave her an old woman to die in the snow. There is a precision in the delineating of emotion and a foreboding sense of inevitable

doom in Scott's poetry, and yet Scott evades a genuine dramatic conflict in his narratives. The protagonists in his poems are always primitives — whether Indians or simple French-Canadian habitants — whose grim fates, while embodying Scott's fatalistic vision, belong essentially to the world of folk literature rather than imaginative drama.

The narrative poems of E. J. Pratt similarly evade dramatic conflict. Pratt adopts what is essentially the existentialist viewpoint so fashionable in the first half of the twentieth century (focussing on the desertion of man by God), and whether he is describing the missionaries among the Indians or modern trans-Atlantic travel, man is seen pitted against the indifferent and destructive force of nature. Pratt's imagination is most fully engaged with those stark, primordial forms of nature which threaten to overwhelm man — the paleolithic iceberg, the pitiless savages, the shark, the granite cliffs of the bleak landscape on which man continues to endure. This stoical imagination finds its fullest expression not in dramatic narrative but in descriptive verse (particularly the Newfoundland poems) which renders in a slow, sculptural style the felt experience of life's intractable hardness. Even the long narrative poems are essentially a kind of plastic art, like monumental friezes whose epic gestures engage our attention not by means of action but through a kind of carved verbal strength.

In Earle Birney's "David", the narrative tradition takes a different turn; the youth in Birney's poem is crippled by his fall in the mountains, but the drama lies not in a betrayal of David by nature, but in his appeal to the narrator to push him over the cliff's edge to his death. True, we are told that only "the sun and incurious clouds" mark the place where David's body is found, but our involvement does not come to rest on that image of an indifferent landscape, but on the narrator's reflection that it was "the last of my youth". Birney, however, has not given us another narrative poem as fine as "David", so that the narrative tradition in Canadian poetry has not yet blossomed into a fully dramatic art.

LYRIC POETRY can be as dramatic as narrative verse, for the imaginative conflict which makes art dramatic is never a matter of content but of style. Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" for example is a "dramatic" poem, for it is woven out of images of longed-for childish innocence in conflict with the conceptualized arguments of a rational and sobered adult. Similarly the rich sensuous vein of Keats's style is heightened dramatically by the logic of awareness upon which his poems are structured. The reference here to the English

poets is not entirely arbitrary, for it is the rhetoric of the great "Romantic" writers that we hear once again when we turn to the Canadian poets of Confederation. I use the term *rhetoric* because English Romanticism assumed a way of viewing and talking about nature that became a kind of convention of response. Generally speaking, Romanticism, after the failure of eighteenth-century rationalism, relocated man's hopes for a more humane and satisfying existence in a benevolent, organic view of nature and the individual's correspondent emotion thereto. This shift in popular philosophical assumptions was to provide the conventions for a non-dramatic mode of art — the retreat into a pastoral and wholly narcissistic world from which all conflict is excluded. Only those artists who could never entirely escape society, whose retreats turned into self-confrontation rather than self-love, continue to engage our interest today.

The degree of interest in Canada's "Confederation" poets will be determined by the extent to which the Romantic conventions have been transformed by the poet's individual style. In the poetry of Charles G. D. Roberts, Bliss Carman and Archibald Lampman the conventions of Romanticism are all too obviously in evidence — the retreat into nature, the sense of irreparable loss in time, the confusing sadness in response to nature's beauty, the world of dreams as somehow preferable to reality. This is the world of Roberts' *Tantramar* and Carman's *Grand Pré*, and of almost all of Lampman's verse. Each of these three poets has his own distinctive way of looking at nature: for Roberts nature is an image of the maternal, but an image bereft of comfort and pervaded rather with the sadness of something lost and irretrievable; Carman's poetry is similarly elegiac except that each poem is structured around a peak moment of erotic ecstasy which can never be recaptured; in Lampman's poems nature is the bridge which leads the poet away from social reality into the more secure and satisfying world of dreams. But in each case these are distinctions in subject matter rather than in style. If the work of any of these poets has genuine stylistic distinction it is the sonnet of Archibald Lampman. Within this compact and highly structured poetic form, Lampman was able to distil the emotion attendant on his retreat into nature and his surrender to dreams. By means of exclusively visual description each sonnet moves to a desired point of complete stasis in the dream image. There is a painterly quality in these sonnets not only in the visual imagery but also in the constant use of colour; the details of a landscape are sketched in as if with a painter's brush, giving the sense of an achieved stillness in place and time. "In November", "A Sunset at Les Eboulements" and "Winter Evening" are particularly fine examples of Lampman's sonnet in which the style renders per-



fectly that state of total passivity desired by the poet. Yet it is not possible to call Lampman's poetry dramatic in the sense I am applying the term here. Conflict has been eliminated from the poems; a persistent sense of melancholy and failure underlie the urge to withdraw into the dreamy pastoral setting, but it is only there by implication, never as an actual fact with which to contend. Society is seen as a hostile and threatening force (to a devastating degree in "The City of the End of Things") and nature correspondingly is a place of refuge, an image of what is tranquil and secure; but both images constitute an evasion of an internal struggle such that Lampman's poetry is not truly dramatic. One might describe the lyrics of Canada's Confederation poets as songs of innocence.

The other significant lyricist among Canada's early poets is the youthful genius from Quebec, Emile Nelligan, who went mad before he was twenty. Curiously Nelligan too might be said to sing songs of innocence: songs of a soul "candide", of the garden of childhood, of a mother gone to be with the saints. But rather than finding consolation in a view of nature as correspondingly innocent, Nelligan despairs of ever re-achieving that blessed, primal state and his lament for a lost childhood swiftly becomes either a narcotic drug or an exhortation to self-destruction. In "Le Vaisseau d'Or" the poet likens himself in his innocence to a golden ship which is wracked by the storms of experience and broken open to reveal a cargo of disgust, hate and neurosis; the devastated ship sinks into a coffin of dreams in the abyss. In "La Romance du Vin" the simulated gaiety of a May song rises in a reckless kind of crescendo to conclude in an outburst of sobbing. The style of Nelligan's poetry is a vivid embodying of his desperate emotions: there are all the delicate verbal nuances of the symbolist poet as he describes the attenuated state of the pure and innocent soul; there is the rush of hypnotic rhythms as the poem plunges headlong through despair into oblivion. A kind of dramatic rhythm exists to Nelligan's poetry as a whole and yet it is an essentially limited drama, for despair is not really the contrary of innocence.

THE FICTIONAL COUNTERPART of the lyric poem is the novel of childhood memories. The recapturing of childhood in an aesthetic form belongs to the pastoral mode wherein the creative imagination, finding present existence unsatisfactory, goes back into the past in quest of a more perfect world — something once experienced but now lost. In recovering lost time the imagination may seek to relive vicariously those earliest experiences in order to discover what has made the present so meaningless, or it may romanticize the past

so that childhood remains the perfectly ordered world, a happy refuge from the chaos of the present. Such great American pastoral novelists as Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner ultimately expose the past for the outrage it has committed on the present and attempt to free themselves from the bond of memory; beneath the golden haze of nostalgia is revealed the painful experience of rejection and failure. The Canadian artist, however, in a land so fraught with limitations, appears to despair of freedom in the present and in order to guarantee a safe, protected place idealizes the past in a consistently nostalgic art.

Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* and W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* are two of the most evocative novels written in this mode. In Buckler's novel the central figure, David Canaan, is plagued by a sense of family guilt and by his being different from other men; but unlike his American fictional counterparts he does not leave the family home, but remains there the rest of his life. His death in the blanketing snowfall culminates a series of images throughout the book wherein the protagonist's emotional preference is for the safe, protected place at home rather than the movement forward of experience in time. The emotional quest in Mitchell's novel of childhood memories is to understand a "feeling" that overwhelmed him as a boy. To the fictional protagonist, Brian O'Connal, it comes variously in the form of ecstatic wonder at the contemplation of a dewdrop on a spiræ leaf or in the form of revulsion at the sight of a dead, two-headed calf. Above all it is a heightened sense of something incomplete, something not achieved. The crucial experience of failure for Brian is in his not being able to feel anything when his father dies; significantly his father's illness and death follow immediately upon the boy's initiation into sexual knowledge which he violently refuses to accept. After this point the feeling never comes again for, as the sympathetic school-master suggests, in reflecting on Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode", that feeling was innocence.

Aesthetically nostalgia effects a compromise between the emotional longing to go back to the past and the conscious recognition that it is neither possible nor ultimately desirable to do so. Through the various strategies of style the artist is able to indulge in his fantasy of recapturing the past, while at the same time, through the very conventions of art, he tacitly concedes that in actuality it is impossible. Buckler and Mitchell heighten the sense of loss integral to nostalgia by making us keenly aware of the passing of time; but in her memory book, *Street of Riches*, Gabrielle Roy eliminates perspectives to such an extent that a sense of joy in recapturing childhood pervades the book throughout. Although

passage of time does underlie the structural arrangement of the stories (the narrator is a small child at the beginning and a teacher with her first school at the close), it plays no casual role within the stories themselves or in their relationship to each other. It is the timeless world of childhood — an eternal summer — that the author has captured in these lyrical and beautifully-wrought vignettes of the past. *Street of Riches* closes with a very moving image of innocent refuge — that of the little schoolroom with its happy children and the narrator-teacher snugly protected against the snowstorm sweeping down over the prairie. Throughout the book the narrator remembers her attic bedroom which is significantly both a retreat from the world (for her self dramatized as “Petite Misère”) and a place where her imagination comes fully alive. (It is from the attic room that she hears the “voices of the pools” and dedicates herself to becoming a writer.) In the final chapter, “To Earn My Living . . .”, the narrator must go out into the world to work, but as a teacher she happily finds herself “as though cut off from the rest of the world in [the] warm little schoolhouse”. She reflects at the book’s close: “I was living through one of the rarest happinesses of my life. Was not all the world a child? Were we not at the day’s morning? . . .”

Gabrielle Roy, however, did not sing only the songs of innocence from her past; the four stories in *The Road past Altamont*, her songs of experience, are bound together by their obsession with the passage of time, with life’s mutability and with the failure of human relationships. This darker dimension to the past, imaged successively in the dying grandmother, the kindly old neighbour, Monsieur Saint-Hilaire, and the “move” of the poor family, has its final focus in the anxiety the narrator feels in relation to her mother, a muted though nonetheless urgent pre-occupation in *Street of Riches* as well. In the concluding section, titled “The Road Past Altamont”, the narrator examines her guilty feelings about leaving her mother and in so doing discovers the motives of her art in her desire to compensate her mother for all of life’s failures and disappointments. There is a profound sadness, however, at the end of this book, for the understanding and the tribute have come too late — art can never replenish life. Though the final section of *The Road past Altamont* is essentially non-dramatic, reflective writing, it nevertheless embodies a fully dramatic awareness that is rare in the course of Canadian art.

THE IMPACT OF STYLE in the aesthetic response is most obvious in the visual arts. Because the “subject” from life is so readily available to our direct perception and not obfuscated in any way by the medium of language,

we automatically demand certain transformations of the life subject in the work of art. Our expectations are those of style. From the outset Canadian painting, as a visual record of the exploring and settling of a vast, northern wilderness, has had its own unique subject matter in a convention of nature images — brooding mountains, stormy lakes, unrelieved snowscapes and the log cabin or tiny village huddled upon this overwhelming landscape. But in what way, we must ask, has this setting been transformed by the imagination of Canada's artists so that a unique way of looking at the familiar scene emerges? In other words, what in the visual arts constitutes a unique Canadian style?

In the very earliest paintings, as in the earliest Canadian literature, style and subject matter are very much at odds with each other. The early artists were working in a cultural tradition that was English and European. They painted the new country but their style does not reflect an indigenous response to that landscape; rather it was an application of a style evolved in the "old country." The one possible exception is the votive painting from colonial Quebec. Ex-votos were done to fulfil religious vows; their execution was usually motivated by thankfulness for a miraculous rescue from danger. The miraculous event was the subject of the painting; in the lower half of the plaque was pictured the threatened disaster (a shipwreck at sea, a man pinned under a fallen tree) and in the upper part the guarantee of imminent rescue in the form of a saint. Ex-votos were a folk art and part of a European tradition, but the style of these paintings in no way distorted the Canadian scene — it was very adaptable to the rugged landscape. Indeed the simultaneous depiction of both the threatened disaster and the guardian saint presiding over the scene creates a perspective which heightens both the sense of danger and the providential refuge. It may be a simplistic juxtaposition and yet it is one which is continuous as long as Canadian art is representational. For much Canadian painting, like literature, evokes a love for what is known and secure, and transforms the humble details of everyday life so that they radiate something of the warmth and affection with which they are viewed.

The only major artist before the turn of this century to develop a distinctive style was Cornelius Krieghoff. Krieghoff painted different phases of life in rural Quebec and his inn scenes such as "J. B. Jolifou, Aubergiste" and "Merrymaking" are among the most famous pieces of Canadian art. But Krieghoff himself was not from Quebec; like Grove, Krieghoff was European-born and his life was similarly peripatetic. Krieghoff was not painting Quebec from the details of his own life, but from the perspective of an outside observer, a man of the world at

large, who saw Quebec in exclusively happy, idyllic terms. The vision of life which pervades his most famous pieces is one of simple, rustic unity in which any social conflict is purely comic and enlivens the sense of merrymaking and revelry. The rich brown tones, the minute, myriad detail give the paintings the warmth and enchantment of children's book illustrations. They present a world similar to Leacock's *Mariposa*, "the little town in the sunshine that once we knew," a visual rendering of the emotion of nostalgia.

The Canadian love of the small and the humble finds its quintessential expression in the canvases of the turn-of-the-century recluse, Ozias Leduc. Leduc chose the most humble subjects possible — apples on a plate, onions, a habitant's simple meal lit by candlelight — but with a delicate (almost caressing) brush-stroke he lavished an affection on his crude subjects which imparts to them a universal beauty. In the sombre little canvas, "*Les Trois Pommes*", the apples glow with a mellow light which suggests a mythical transformation of the subject through the style. In literature only Grove's intimate love of nature on his prairie rides approaches the sensitivity and humility expressed in Leduc's art. The small subject lovingly represented appears again in some of the canvases by L. L. Fitzgerald where the discipline of an essentially ascetic style (a rigorous pointilism) can render a little plant with the heightened quality of affection.

In the work of A. Y. Jackson one finds a visual counterpart to the Confederation poets' view of nature as maternal and all-abiding. Jackson's paintings are more literally pictorial than the work of the rest of the Group, yet that one principle of structure, the soft, wavy line, transforms all of Jackson's scenes into a unique aesthetic vision, whether he is painting Quebec, the Prairies or British Columbia. Jackson's style, however, is not dramatic; while man and nature frequently appear together in Jackson's paintings — the small house or little village huddled against the mountains and the snow — the landscape swells and subsides in such a way as to enfold and protect the human settlement rather than threaten destruction. "*Winter, Charlevoix County*", "*Grey Day, Laurentians*", "*Valley of the Gouffre River*", "*Houses, St. Urbain*", are particularly striking examples of this aspect of Jackson's art. There is no conflict between the expanse of nature and the fragile human dwelling; rather they both reflect the artist's sense of isolation, and his search for solace in the maternal embrace of a landscape and its lonely inhabitants.

The most dramatic of the non-abstract artists is Emily Carr — a remarkable fact in that she was working in the tradition of Post-Impressionism, a movement which had long spent itself. The style of her paintings, like Jackson's, embodies

a quest for unity; the wavy structural lines weave together the lush contours of earth, stumps, evergreens and sky in a vigorous declaration of harmony. The consummate expression of this pastoral vision is in those dark, womb-like interiors of the British Columbia rain forest. But Emily Carr also painted the grotesque figures of the Indian totems — realistically at first (for historical purposes) then expressionistically, as correlatives of her own fierce and indomitable energies. In much of her best work (pieces like "Big Raven," "Zunoqua of the Cat Village," "Nirvana") these two forces come together in a dynamic conflict of styles — the Indian carvings asserting their phallic identity against the unified contours of vegetation and sky. The dialectic of sexual energies, however, never suggests final union or achievement; the fierce insistence on identity creates an art of cruel pastoral.

If one quality, however, is continuous throughout Canadian painting, it is that affection expressed for what is small and plain but rich in detail. It is a quality of style in the intimate, weightless paintings of David Milne, in the fragile landscapes of Jacques de Tonnancour. And in the abstracts of Paul-Emile Borduas it emerges again reminding us of the gentle ruggedness of a Gagnon and the humility of a Leduc.

THE INSTINCTIVE QUEST of the Canadian imagination for pastoral innocence runs directly counter to the critical, self-conscious intentions of much Canadian art. Living in the shadow of two strongly-defined cultures, English and American (not to mention the effect of France on Quebec), Canadian artists have always been highly self-conscious of their cultural limitations and their relative insignificance in the international context. On the one hand this has reinforced the escapist element in Canadian art (the sense of Canada as a refuge from the larger competitive world), but on the other hand it has made Canadian artists very self-critical, anxious to be aware, to understand, to criticize. This is the tradition in Canadian art that we are most likely to point to with pride — a tradition that includes the "naturalist" novels of F. P. Grove, the ironic parables of Morley Callaghan, the abstracts of Lawren Harris, Gabrielle Roy's social novels (*The Tin Flute*, *The Cashier*), Birney's topical poems, the "great Canadian novels" of Hugh MacLennan.

This critical self-consciousness has of course produced the highest flower of Canadian culture, namely the imaginative critical visions of Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan, two writers and thinkers whose reputation and influence

are truly international. Moreover, it has also engendered a widely praised hybrid art form one might call the fictional documentary which bears a definite mark of aesthetic conviction and validity (examples: the descriptive pioneer treatises of Catharine Parr Traill, Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*, the historical Indian paintings of Paul Kane, such Canadian films as Allan King's *Warrendale* and *A Married Couple*, Scott Symon's autobiographical *Place d'Armes*). However, this element of self-consciousness is in many ways inimical to the process of the imagination in creating art. If the function of the imagination, as suggested above, is to explore those potential areas of our experience which must be repressed in the interest of social and physical survival, then this self-conscious urge will restrain the imagination, for it insists on the compromise of communal understanding and acceptance. The individual experience of loneliness and frustration is assuaged by shared philosophical assumptions about life. The result, in its extreme form, has been a great deal of what one refers to as "academic" art in Canada. A number of gifted poets would seem to have been hindered rather than enriched by their intellectual pursuits; one thinks here of university professors such as A. J. M. Smith or Robert Finch, and especially of Jay MacPherson, whose talent has been wholly absorbed in the myth criticism of Northrop Frye. The sustained imaginative energy of an Irving Layton appears the more remarkable in this light. Earle Birney's very rich and lively instinct for verbal sound patterns and rhythms, however, is frequently betrayed in its clever application to a popular philosophical preoccupation or fashionable artistic stance. Similarly E. J. Pratt's imaginative response to the primordial instincts of life is diluted by the lengthy deliberations in his poetry as to the existence of God and man's place in the cosmos.

The most notorious example of the Canadian imagination betrayed by critical self-consciousness is Hugh MacLennan's attempt to forge in his fiction our national identity. The two dominant preoccupations in his novels — his personal struggle for selfhood on the one hand and his public attempt to define the Canadian consciousness on the other — do not relate to each other in a genuine dialectic; rather the public ambition provides an escape from the irresolvable complexities of the personal dilemma. This pattern is constant in all of MacLennan's books. The imaginative core of his writing lies in the father-son relationship which in his first book, *Barometer Rising*, is set forth in the struggle between the young war victim, Neil MacRae, and his tyrannical uncle, Geoffrey Wain. But the drama in the novel is ultimately a false one, for this oedipal conflict is evaded by means of the Halifax harbour explosion; indeed there is never



a confrontation between the antagonists, for the explosion conveniently kills Wain and leaves MacRae free to depart with Wain's daughter. In the last half of the book the Halifax disaster becomes the novel's authentic subject (again the documentary instinct in Canadian art), the external drama in the harbour and, finally, the question of Canada's international identity supplanting the novel's imaginative theme. This preoccupation with national identity reaches embarrassing proportions in *Two Solitudes* and *The Watch That Ends the Night*. *Each Man's Son* is potentially MacLennan's most effective novel for here he returns to the actual landscape of his Cape Breton childhood and the conflict is more genuinely painful because it is confused with feelings of nostalgia; but again the plot is resolved in *deus ex machina* fashion (MacLennan's classicism?) and the novel again has a hollow centre.

Only in Canadian humour is there any effective merging of the critical self-consciousness and the artist's deepest imaginative instinct. In part this is because the comic imagination by its very nature seeks to criticize and provoke awareness through exposure and ridicule. But more important is the fact that satire demands a social norm, a rational point of view against which human folly may be measured, and this automatically precludes a highly personal and eccentric imagination. What is notable in Canadian humour is the unspoken agreement that the viewpoint of the group rather than of the rational individual is best — another manifestation of the "garrison mentality." It is the foolish individual who elicits scorn and ridicule; it is never the whole community that is condemned. Though it may seem that all the individuals in Stepsure's village are subject to ridicule for their self-indulgent behaviour ("my cousin Harrow, Saunders Scantocreesh and a few others excepted"), it is the communal Puritan values of hard work and piety which prevail. Similarly in Leacock's *Mariposa* or Robertson Davies's *Salterton*, while the small town is being laughed at, the satirist never questions the values upon which that town's life is based. And in *The Clockmaker* Haliburton very carefully balances Sam Slick's shrewd observations on the Bluenoses with our emotional reaction to Slick as an outsider and a comic figure. Because Canadian humour is thus essentially conservative it is also finally pastoral: the agrarian values by which Stepsure lives are for McCulloch clearly threatened and on the wane; for Leacock the town of *Mariposa* lies somewhere in the past in our dreams, and for Davies that childish certainty of being at the centre of the world only exists in the *Salterton* of his memory and imagination and no longer in the small city he left behind years ago.

Surely it is also significant that writers from outside Canada have responded

to the landscape and its inhabitants not as a frontier for growth, but as a place of lonely refuge. *Maria Chapdelaine*, a kind of archetype of the Canadian novel with its seasonal time structure and steadfast heroine, is essentially a folk tale and for its author, Louis Hemon, a sophisticated Parisian, it represented a retreat into the simple world of the habitant. For Willa Cather the world of late seventeenth-century Quebec, which she recreated in *Shadows on the Rock*, represented a retreat from the cynically indifferent and ever-changing world at large; both the author and her characters take pleasure in "a feeling of being cut off from everything and living in a world of twilight and miracles." And in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, probably the greatest work of fiction to employ the Canadian landscape in its imagery, pastoral retreat is again the image of Canada which emerges. Geoffrey Firmin, the drunken protagonist of Lowry's master fiction, thinks of the cool, wooded inlets on the British Columbia coast as a kind of green, paradisaical retreat from the hell of his guilt under the hot Mexican sun. The references are few, but always crucial, the structural antithesis to Firmin's volcano of self-destruction. In this same light it is interesting that the Canadian writers who have found the largest reading public outside Canada are those who have fashioned the innocent, self-contained world of pastoral in their art — writers like Lucy Maude Montgomery, Stephen Leacock and Mazo de la Roche.

THE TRULY REMARKABLE FACT about Ross's *As For Me and My House* is that it is a fully dramatized work of art. The emotional frustration that gave rise to the novel is not evaded in the details of an escapist pursuit (like Grove's drives or Scott's primitives), nor externalized in a struggle with nature; rather the deeply-felt experiences of rejection, failure and renewed hope are relentlessly focussed on and dramatized in the passionate triangles that form around the narrator and her husband. This is not to suggest that Ross's novel lies outside the tradition I have described; rather it puts it at the very centre, for what is dramatized is that overwhelming sense of life's limitations, of the repression and the evasions that are necessary to survive in the physical and emotional wilderness of the Canadian landscape. This novel's style — the claustrophobic narration of Mrs. Bentley presumably writing in her daybook — is the aesthetic consummation of that sense of frustration and limitation. In Ross's novel the details of the setting and of nature are never described for their own sake but are always subsumed within the emotional penumbra of the characters; the false fronts of the town, the leaky roof, the drought and heat, the dust storms, the

snow and tedium of an endless winter are all metaphors for the emotional drama.

The other Canadian novelist whose fiction is a fully dramatized art is Marie-Claire Blais. Unlike the other novels of Ross which are considerably less effective than *As For Me and My House*, all of Miss Blais's novels form a significant part of her art, though *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* stands out as her masterpiece to date. The essential drama around which her writing turns is set forth in her first published novel, *Mad Shadows (La Belle Bête)*. Scarcely a novel, *Mad Shadows* is a kind of grotesque fairy-tale whose plot focusses ultimately on the failure of maternal love. The central figure in the story is the ugly daughter who is rejected by her beautiful mother for her loathsome physical appearance. Out of desperate envy of his beauty, she scars her idiot brother's face and both children, now unloved by the mother, end their lives in madness and suicide. Maternal rejection is an obsessive theme in Miss Blais's writing and in *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* its effect is central to a whole complex of miseries. In this story about a family of sixteen children the mother is an exhausted, shadowy figure, almost totally absent from the book. On the day of his birth Emmanuel cries for his mother, but he is told by the old grandmother that his mother has already gone back to the fields to work. The void created by the mother's absence defines the family drama of misery and despair; that void is brooded over by the formidable, larger-than-life figure of Grand-Mère Antoinette whose harshness and compassion are both idealized. From the viewpoint of the central consciousness, Jean-Le Maigre, *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* might be seen as a kind of aborted Bildungsroman; but the book is never a memory novel, for the plight of the unhappy family, though narrated episodically, is relentlessly exposed as a continuous action in the present.

*A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* is a particularly Canadian work of art for the sense of winter and of life's limitations (especially defined by poverty) are nowhere felt more strongly. Yet as in Ross's novel, these physical limitations serve to define the emotional deprivation that is being dramatized. That eroding sense of poverty is never externalized as a social issue, nor is the harshness of the Quebec landscape seen as an existentialist "condition." Rather, in the oblique and relentless manner of her writing Miss Blais remains faithful stylistically to the painful vision of her imagination and in so doing has created both a fully dramatic and genuinely Canadian work of art.

# A CURSED AND SINGULAR BLESSING

*Gary Geddes*

S OUSTER is one of those rare poets who, like a good wine, improve with age. I'm not sure whose age, Souster's or mine. My first encounter with Souster's work was in 1966 in Frank Watt's poetry seminar, somewhere in the catacombs of University College in Toronto. I had just returned from a year in England, where it was assumed that poets did exist in Canada, and from ten years of school and college in B.C. where, whatever the truth of rumours about home-grown talent, none of it ever seeped down into the classes. We were a motley crew, an actor, a religious, a radical (before that stance became fashionable), a schoolmarm from Ottawa, a couple of tired instructors from Ryerson. And myself, hot out of a Diploma in Education course at Reading University.

I had met Souster briefly through a friend of Victor Coleman and had spent a curious evening with him and friends putting together the pages of the first number of *Island*. I can remember nothing of what was said that evening. Souster was typically quiet with new people. He and Victor seemed very close and I felt like a distinctly alien spirit in the group because of my general ignorance and my academic ambitions. But I do remember Souster's poem, "A Death in Rutherford (in memoriam W.C.W.)" on the back cover of the magazine, which he signed for me:

We can't argue the right  
of your body to be lowered  
into peace:  
                                but nothing else  
can be allowed to rot,  
mix with dust.  
                                You belong  
to so many of us.

And I remember being impressed by the letter to Souster from Williams that was included in that issue. Souster was my first contact with an established poet, not to mention a Canadian one, and here he was receiving a personal letter from a more famous American poet. After expressing his inability to read and to appreciate Layton, Williams says:

But somehow when I read you I am moved. I am moved by your subject matter and I am moved by the way that has induced you to conform to it as the very fountain head of your art.

It is the way that the man speaks that we wait for. A poet does not talk *about* what is in him; he talks a double language, it is the presence in him that speaks. It is his possession by that presence that speaks. For the moment he is lost in that identity. And each age is marked by the presences that possess it so its poets are seized by them also, in the flesh, and strut about among us unknown. Poor powerless ghosts, their only life is that which they gain from the poets who lend them a life now and then.

We identify ourselves today (by our technique, unaffected) with those presences which live defeated about us. For do what we may, it is a technique which we have to understand and to master. Try to broaden the treatment of the line. You have to know what a line is, what it has to include, when to expand, when to move rapidly, trippingly and when to plod heavily along. I was happy to see you refer to Olson. But never forget that you are definitely you. You have a chance. *Light and Shadow* was the first thing that caught my eye. *The Lilac Poem* is also good. *To an Antisemite* has it also. There are others. Have confidence in yourself. You've got it.

The matter of subjects and presentation in Watt's seminar was decided early in the term by a cursory glance through the prescribed texts, one of which was Milton Wilson's *Poetry at Mid-Century*, then the only serious sampling of "moderns" in Canada. The more pushy students, myself included, wanted to try their hands at heavies like Smith and Klein and Avison and Jay Macpherson, while the slackers among us (usually the teachers) made grabs for Layton and Cohen and Souster. We staggered through a Toronto winter and through interminable term papers on Anglo-Saxon influences in Birney's poetry, on Pratt's leviathans, on the maple leaf poets, and one bizarre coupling of Pratt's *The Titanic* and Charles G. D. Roberts' "The Iceberg" with the unintentionally symbolic title of "Imagination on the Rocks". Finally, the first paper on Souster was presented; it was on Souster and jazz, and was delivered by a good-natured layabout from McGill named Joe. Joe was first of all a film enthusiast and therefore not taken seriously by the careerists in the class. As expected, his paper was

somewhat inconsequential; it was non-literary, lacked polish, quoted almost no critics, and did not use the magic-formula word of the graduate school, "synthesis". However, it *was* important as the first piece to draw north-south lines of influence between Canada and the U.S., rather than the strictly east-west lines between Canada and England that dominated our study of literature in the English language. Here was a Toronto poet-banker, not quite a Wallace Stevens, but a figure of some reputation, who read the American poets, who had correspondence with W. C. Williams and, most amazing of all, listened to jazz, wrote about it in poems, and identified in some mysterious way with the forces of resistance and anarchy that thrive (or throve then) in the subsoil of American culture.

I remember some stir being created by that paper and by the one that followed, on Souster as a social critic. Souster's colloquial manner and his shocking eight-line mini-parables provided a welcome break from the control, the metaphorical complexity, and the mythical allusion in A. J. M. Smith's verses. And yet some of us still felt uneasy; we felt, first, that imagist poems at best were well-laid paving-stones on a dead-end street, that they gave little and asked little of a reader. All that one could say of them was, so what? Secondly, we suspected poets with ideas, especially those who expressed their ideas directly rather than indirectly through sound and image. Souster, after all, was a bit too raw, too common; perhaps, in retrospect, we thought he was just a bit too Canadian. His muse was flat-footed from pounding a beat in downtown Toronto.

WE WERE NOT entirely to blame for our blindness to Souster. I discovered two years ago while making selections for *15 Canadian Poets* that Souster's didactic verses, his slices of seedy city life with embarrassing moral and philosophical tags, constitute only a small part of his work. We had been reacting in part to Wilson's selections in *Poetry at Mid-Century*. The Souster who emerges from those pages is quite different from my Souster: mine is far more lyrical, his imagination stirred more by the mysteries of change and loss and death than by signs of social and political injustice. Wilson's selection was one-sided, as if to balance the other very academic offerings in his book. Souster's new selection, *The Years*, however, makes it possible to see the range and scope of his abilities as a lyric poet and, also, to understand the relation between his lyricism and his didacticism. It contains 63 pages of poems from the sixties, 58 from the fifties, and 29 from the forties.

The Sixties poems are interesting because they reveal the play of Souster's moral imagination upon the fabric of public events, most of which have been popular with the media: Vietnam, Biafra, pollution, drug-trafficking, and militarism generally. What emerges from almost all of Souster's social commentary is the question of personal responsibility. Souster is no Marxist or Socialist with a political or philosophical programme against which to measure the events of his time. His position is that of the beleaguered humanist, troubled, as he suggests in "The Problem", with the matter of empathy, or sharing:

How to share the aching feet  
of the already limping  
deliverer of handbills.

Souster feels guilt for his insensitivity to, and unwillingness to be involved in, the conviction of a fellow-poet for trafficking in drugs; and he laments the inertia that works against his anti-war convictions, that leaves the responsibility of protest to the young ("Peace Demonstration, 1967"):

So it is left for these,  
our restless, unfulfilled  
youths of the sit-ins,  
peace marches, to carry  
the burden of guilt  
for all of us, spelling it out  
on their crude signs, hammering it home  
as the police move in to drag them  
night-stick them into  
waiting paddy wagons.

In this new selection a certain irony and self-consciousness emerges, which saves many of the poems from either banality or sentimentality. In "Confrontation", for example, Souster's poetic persona struggles with his inclination to shout "Bloody Butcher" at the president during a visit to Expo; when he is escorted away by the Montreal police, he cannot help making his point again but this time modified to "Bloody Butcher, sir!" "Report to the Military Governor" is a fine piece of controlled irony which makes its statement humourously and economically:

In the City of Toronto itself  
only one incident, and even that  
hardly worthy of record —



One of our tanks  
in circling their City Hall Square,  
brushed against a large piece of sculpture  
(purchased, they tell me,  
from an Englishman named Moore) ;

at which their mayor,  
who had witnessed the accident,  
stormed from his council chamber  
shaking both fists at our troops,  
who, not sharing his concern,  
seized him and strung him up  
(by the golden chain of office  
he happened to be wearing)  
on that same oddshaped casting,  
where I'm told he swung  
like a pendulum keeping  
not very accurate time —

whose body, however,  
I'm very proud to report,  
wasn't hung up by the heels  
like that sad man Il Duce,

which shows if nothing else  
the good sense the moderation  
of Our Glorious Revolution  
of November 31st.

Souster's sense of his own guilt does not make good poetry when it expresses itself in the form of complacent moralizing or righteous indignation. The posture of complacency is mostly absent from *The Years*, but the indignation is not. I heard Souster read "Death Chant for Mr. Johnson's America" several years ago at the Central Library in Toronto and I don't think I'll ever forget the air of quiet embarrassment that hung over the audience when Souster finished — not at the catalogue of atrocities and inhumanities but at the patent phoniness of the tone. It was a self-indulgence, but one that took ten minutes. Warmed-over rage is as unpalatable as warmed-over porridge. Even the Ginsbergian rhetoric did not help. We know all about "addicts readying fixes in dirty washrooms" and "mountains of used cars in East River". And there was Souster, who always avoided name-dropping and literary allusion, making references to Jeffers, Crane, Ginsberg, and Pound. He even felt obliged to flog the dead horse of

Pound's imprisonment in the States. Seeing the poem in print, I still feel that it is unworthy of Souster, an aberration he allowed himself in the pressure of events. He is not capable of such a large statement, such sweeping generalizations, without descending to posturing and self-caricature. I can't help thinking of Williams' remark in his letter to Souster about the *presences* haunting the age; none of them would be given a new lease on life in this poem.

Auden once argued, in this connection, that "The characteristic style of 'Modern' poetry is an intimate tone of voice, the speech of one person addressing one person, not a large audience; whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds phony." There's sufficient truth in this observation to make it worth considering. In an age of unprecedented change and information accumulation, when our ears are full of cries from the marketplace, the music hall, and the political arena, finding a convincing voice is not easy. Souster's response to these pressures has been, for the most part, to cultivate his own garden, to remain faithful to his early inspirations. He remains, in his own words, an unrepentant regionalist, content to chronicle and celebrate the emotions, the things, events, and people, of his immediate experience. One of his most convincing voices is the still, small voice of the imagist, of which there are several fine examples in *The Years*, such as *July Noon*:

Barricade of clouds  
anchored down  
a few flickering butterflies.

Any moment now  
the really bugged cicada  
will open all the stops  
on their crazed calliope.

In this moment's zone of silence  
a poem writes itself.

and "Morning Lake":

Ghost-like  
unreal  
mist holding its fog veil  
far over the lake.

Overhead  
sun beats down  
skies ride high and blue  
at mid-morning.

But look!  
 A dark finger shows  
 at the edge of the veil,  
 becomes as we watch  
 some part of shore  
 tied to a pendant  
 of green-blue water.

These poems, like the earlier "Study: The Bath" and "Six Quart Basket", are free of what Olson calls the "lyrical interference of the individual ego": eye and mind are concentrated on the image and what it gives off in isolation. Too many poets, as Souster argues, in "The Cobra", "can't seem to get beyond / the wonder of themselves, / it holds them, / fascinates them, like the swaying death / of the cobra."

There are in Souster's best lyrics a simplicity and an unpretentiousness that are disarming. "There's No Way Out of It", the first poem in *The Years*, has a beautiful falling movement that is almost unbroken by asides, non-sequiturs, or personal allusions; nor does the form of the poem call attention to itself:

There's no way out of it —  
 each leaf will sift down  
 slowly, grudgingly  
 to the cold, bared ground,  
 grass will push out  
 another blade of grass,  
 skies will do their best  
 to hide the sun, clouds will put  
 their darkest faces on.

It will be all squirrels  
 and acorns (acorns, anyway)  
 along the street, maples red  
 and proud for a week, then  
 humbled by the wind. It will be  
 so unlike death that only  
 pure fools and ageing poets  
 won't be taken in.

And it's happening  
 outside my window at the very moment  
 of a long September day.

With one thing that's sure,  
 there's no way out of it.

Souster has little interest in logical discontinuity and metaphorical complexity; he sees the poem as an *utterance* that moves as quickly and directly as possible to its inevitable conclusion. If there is a problem with this poem, and with several other fine lyrics in *The Years*, it is that Souster feels moved to tidy up after himself, by tying together apparently ragged ends, by summarizing what has already been adequately rendered through the imagery. The last two lines seem unnecessary here, even considering their usefulness in terms of structuring; so also does the last line of "This Heat Crazy Day", where the 'situation' of the poem, clearly presented through juxtaposition of images of youth and age, life and death, is sadly spelled out for the reader. What Lawrence said of free verse is worth repeating: "free verse has its own *nature* . . . it is neither star nor pearl but instantaneous plasm. It has no finish. It has no satisfying stability, satisfying for those who like the immutable. None of this. It is the instant; the quick." Writing good free verse, like riding bareback, is beyond the capacity of most poets; either their poem sits dully in the yard swishing its tail or careens wildly all over creation, endangering both rider and bystanders. In the face of these difficulties, a poet may be tempted to harness his imagination unnecessarily, to use in practice shaping devices that he would reject in theory.

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OUSTER'S LYRICS also contain his best social criticism. This criticism seems most convincing when it comes indirectly, when, in the course of talking about what he knows intimately, Souster reveals his awareness of the texture and quality of life around him. In "Forecast", the persona of the poem contemplates his own death, not a glamorous, violent highway death but a slow withering death from life in the sunless, polluted city:

Although my best nightmare  
is a violent highway death,  
me crowding the dotted-line  
to pass the slow-poke ahead,  
not seeing the car coming up  
at express speed until the last  
stabbing thrust of his headlights —  
  
and although I sense my luck  
has almost run out by now  
at cross-walks, most street corners,

I now forecast my certain death  
 on a warm day like this, the haze  
 iron-heavy in the streets,  
 no real sun shining through,  
  
 both lungs refusing at last  
 to breathe in another choking breath  
 of blue-coated, lifeless exhaust smoke.

Here is Souster at his best: determination to use the imagery of the city, with its highways, dotted-lines, and street corners; the colloquial manner that can accommodate to good advantage everyday expressions like “slow-poke” and “run out”; the capacity to render weak common nouns — like light, smoke, haze — more concrete through subtle adjectival constructions. The success of this poem lies in voice and image: where an ecological diatribe would have failed, a powerful comment is made indirectly through the images in this very measured variation on the traditional lament for the passing of time. The violence of death by collision is carried over into the description of death by pollution in the images of “irony-heavy” haze and “blue-coated, lifeless exhaust smoke”; if anything, the latter death appears not only unglamorous and pedestrian, but also intensely horrifying. The poem has a strong rhythmic push, a relentless headlong quality, that is achieved by the naturalness of the diction, the subtle manipulation of syntax and absence of full-stops; the rush of the initial image of the speeding car merges with the slower but equally deadly instruments of death, like iceberg and *Titanic*.

There is much to say about Souster’s verse, about his concern for craft, especially his untiring preoccupation with the *line* as something more than an arbitrary way of breaking up prose poems. I am reminded of Williams’ advice to Souster to “Try to broaden the treatment of the line” and of Souster’s own statement in “In the Same Joyful Way”, where he compares the poet with the steam-shovel and other wrecking equipment at work in the city:

if, say, we could rebuild  
 the poem with such fire, such abandon,  
 all trickery, cross-purposes forgotten,  
 if it only dance and sing! —  
  
 who knows how many  
 of the old walls might crack,  
 aye, even fall,  
 under the smashing force of the line reborn!

Anyone interested in Souster's verse would do well to consider his many poems about the poetic process. Souster has never been a tub-thumper or played the personality game that the public and the media encourage; his real concern, as he says in "Invocation to the Muse", has been to write good poems:

Nevertheless, desiring nothing  
And expecting little, living only  
For your secret inner praise, I give thanks  
That you should have chosen me for your cursed  
And singular blessing.

*A cursed and singular blessing.* Souster's range is not large but his concern for technique is, as Pound would say, a test of his sincerity. In *The Years*, he describes one of his Jazz favourites, Ed Hall, as "a man at one with his art, not fighting it, / not trying to prove a damn thing." The less Souster tries to prove, the more at ease he seems with his craft.

## TWO AUTHORS IN SEARCH OF A CHARACTER

*Stephen Scobie*

IT WAS SURELY COINCIDENCE ENOUGH that two of Canada's finest young poets should both, in one year, produce books on the notably non-Canadian legend of Billy the Kid, without the further coincidence that both should win Governor-General's Awards. Of course, bp Nichol's award was for four books, of which *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* is the shortest, and perhaps the slightest; this point has had to be made in response to the controversy over giving such an award to "fifteen paragraphs of bad pornography". If Nichol's book is "bad pornography", that is only because it is good art; and although it is, at least superficially, a very much slighter book than Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, it is not wholly absurd to examine them in the same light. The reasons why these authors should choose this subject — rather than some roughly equivalent Canadian figure, such as Louis Riel, or even Paul Rose — are to a great degree personal. It is quite possible that bp wrote his book just for fun, because Michael was writing his. More relevantly, Ondaatje's book is a natural outgrowth from his love of Hollywood (and Italian) Westerns: among his favourite films are Sergio Leone's mythic *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and Arthur Penn's contribution to the legend of Billy the Kid, *The Left Handed Gun*. (Ondaatje's book is subtitled "Left Handed Poems".) But in addition to these personal reasons, the figure of Billy the Kid is particularly relevant to certain central concerns in the work of these poets, and, especially in Ondaatje's case, their treatment of him becomes a major contribution to the development of their work. The purpose of this article, then, is to examine the two books and their widely different approaches to the legend of Billy the Kid, and to see how these approaches illuminate the characteristic concerns and obsessions of the two poets.

It should perhaps be stressed at the outset that this kind of approach is in a way a distortion of Nichol's book. *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* is primarily a joke, a clever and light-hearted skit, as opposed to the intense seriousness of Ondaatje's approach. Nichol's jokes are, however, on potentially serious subjects. To work out all the thematic implications which his fifteen paragraphs barely suggest may seem like building mountains out of molehills; and, though I believe the foundations are there for such an enterprise, the elaboration should not obscure the fact that the most characteristic virtues of Nichol's book are its wit, its economy, and its refusal to take itself too seriously.

Nichol's title stands in a long tradition of books claiming to tell the "truth" about Billy: *The True Life of Billy the Kid*, by Don Jenardo (1881); *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid*, by Pat Garrett (ghost-written by Ash Upson) (1882); *Billy the Kid, the True Story of a Western 'Bad Man'*, by Emerson Hough (1901); *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, by Walter Noble Burns (1926); *The Real Billy the Kid*, by Miguel Otero (1936); *The Authentic Death of Hendry Jones*, by Charles Neider (1956); *The True Story of Billy the Kid*, by William Lee Hamlin (1959); etc. The point about all these "true" and "authentic" biographies is that very few of them are. The historical facts about Billy have been buried under a vast accretion of legend.

The legend itself has changed and developed over the years. For the first twenty years or so after Billy's death, writers strove to outdo each other in creating ever more extravagant pictures of his villainy; he became a devil incarnate, a paragon of evil. Then, about the beginning of this century, the trend reversed; Billy became sentimentalised into a poor, misunderstood kid, excuses and justifications were found for his killings, he was transformed into a folk-hero of the Robin Hood variety. In 1930, the first of Hollywood's film versions of Billy the Kid starred the former All-American football star, Johnny Mack Brown; thirty years later, Penn's film starred Paul Newman.

The major work in this posthumous "rehabilitation" of Billy's reputation is Walter Noble Burns' *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, which Ondaatje acknowledges as his major source. Burns' book is of highly questionable historical accuracy, and is filled with writing in the style of the following:

Fate set a stage. Out of nowhere into the drama stepped this unknown boy. Opposite him played Death. It was a drama of Death and the Boy. Death dogged his trail relentlessly. It was for ever clutching at him with skeleton hands. It lay in ambush for him. It edged him to the gallows' stairs. By bullets, conflagration,



stratagems, every lethal trick, it sought to compass his destruction. But the boy was not to be trapped. He escaped by apparent miracles; he was saved as if by necromancy. He laughed at Death. Death was a joke. He waved Death a jaunty good-bye and was off to new adventures. But again the inexorable circle closed. New life seemed sweet. It beckoned to love and happiness. A golden vista opened before him. He set his foot upon the sunlit road. Perhaps for a moment the boy dreamed this drama was destined to a happy ending. But no. Fate prompted from the wings. The moment of climax was at hand. The boy had had his hour. It was Death's turn. And so the curtain.

Although Ondaatje's literary abilities are far above Burns's, several of the legendary accretions which Burns perpetuated show up again in Ondaatje's book. For instance, Ondaatje follows Burns in setting the shooting of Tom O'Folliard by Pat Garrett on Christmas night. This was one of many emotional touches added by Burns to reflect against Garrett's character (for, as Billy changed from villain to hero, Garrett necessarily swung in the opposite direction) and to develop the theme of Billy's betrayal. In actual fact, the shooting took place on December 18th. Further, Ondaatje's account of Azariah F. Wild's participation in this event is pure invention; both Burns and Garret himself mention Wild only once in passing, and not in connection with this incident.

This kind of consideration is important, of course, only to the very limited extent to which Ondaatje's book is concerned with giving an accurate historical view of the Kid. Clearly, this is not his intention, though some passages (such as the death of Charlie Bowdre) do appear to be quite accurate, and the general tone of many of the descriptions, the wealth of detail and the intensity of the images' realization, must appear very convincing to the unwary reader. Like many writers, Ondaatje alters the facts of Billy's death (as, hilariously, does Nichol); one of the standard tricks of writers sentimentalising Billy was to pretend that someone else (in one version, his own father!) had been shot by mistake and that Billy, complete with Mexican sweetheart, rode off into the sunset. Penn's film has Billy committing virtual suicide by pretending to go for his gun when he is in fact unarmed; after Garrett's shot Billy staggers forward holding out his empty hand to the killer.

But Ondaatje's and Nichol's alterations and manipulations of historical fact are not due, as is the case with many previous writers of "true" and "authentic" histories, to ignorance or to the desire to "justify" Billy; rather, they fit in with the most recent developments of the legend of Billy the Kid, which move away from the simple pendulum of what Kent Ladd Steckmesser calls "The Satanic Billy" and "The Sainly Billy" towards much more complex uses of the total

*idea* of Billy the Kid, fact and fiction, as a mythological character. This examination of the mythology of Billy the Kid is apparent in such works as Samuel R. Delany's splendid SF novel *The Einstein Intersection*, in which he appears as "Bonny William" or "Kid Death", and Michael McClure's play *The Beard*, in which, somewhere in eternity, he conducts a brilliant, repetitive, and obscene dialogue with Jean Harlow.

This, incidentally, may be one reason why both Ondaatje and Nichol treated a "non-Canadian" subject: few Canadian outlaw-heroes have been as widely and as thoroughly mythologised as Billy the Kid, though the process is perhaps taking place with Riel. Anyway, "non-Canadian" is a red herring: mythology may be national in origin, but the significance of a figure as completely metamorphosed as Billy the Kid is totally international.

To return, then, to Nichol's title: "this" he assures us "is the true eventual story of billy the kid." The first page of Nichol's book is a demonstration of the absolute relativity of any definition of "truth" in a case like this.

It is not the story as he told it for he did not tell it to me. he told it to others who wrote it down, but not correctly. there is no true eventual story but this one. had he told it to me i would have written a different one. i could not write the true one had he told it to me.

Compare this with Pat Garrett's "Authentic Life" which opens with the claim that "I have listened, at camp-fires, on the trail, on the prairies and at many different plazas, to his disconnected relations of events of his early and more recent life." Garrett continues to list a number of people who knew Billy and whom he has personally interviewed or written to; he can therefore "safely guarantee that the reader will find in my little book a true and concise relation of the principal interesting events therein, without exaggeration or excusation." The whole is intended "to correct the thousand false statements which have appeared in the public newspapers and in yellow-covered, cheap novels." Burns at one point disingenuously admits:

The foregoing tales may be regarded, as you please, as the apocryphal cantos of the saga of Billy the Kid. They are not thoroughly authenticated, though possibly they are, in the main, true. Most of them are perhaps too ugly to have been inventions. If you are skeptical, your doubt may be tempered by the fact that they have at least always gone with the legend and have such authority as long-established currency may confer.

Nichol's paragraph may be read as a commentary on these and all similar claims. The "true" and "eventual" story cannot be told by any eye-witness; the more "reliable" their claims are, the less they are to be trusted. If Billy himself had told the story to Nichol, "i would have written a different one." The paragraph is a dismissal of any possibility of objective truth in reporting; it insists that any observer changes what he sees as soon as he attempts to express it. Language does not report reality: it creates reality. From this, two conclusions might emerge: first, that even if Billy himself were to tell his own story, he could not tell it truly; and second, that the only "true" story is the one which rejects any attempt at historicity and aims instead at the "truth" of a work of art; "eventually all other stories will appear untrue beside this one." Of course there is a tongue-in-cheek element here: Nichol is fully enjoying his outrageous claim that his fifteen paragraph joke is going to replace all other versions of the story, including, presumably, that being written by his friend Michael Ondaatje. But beneath the joke is the deadly seriousness of the artist who can dismiss everything outside his own creation, claiming it alone as an absolute. And these views of language and art are surely at the very centre of Nichol's aesthetic, his proclamation of "the language revolution". What matters, then, is not so much the factual record — how many men Billy actually killed or in what year he was actually born — as the legendary image that he lived 21 years and killed 21 men. (For what it's worth, it appears more probable that he lived about 24 and killed about 7.) The "eventual" story of Billy the Kid is beyond history.

The "historical" view is even more explicitly rejected in Nichol's second Chapter. The first paragraph reads:

history says that billy the kid was a coward. the true eventual story is that billy the kid is dead or he'd probably shoot history in the balls. history always stands back calling people cowards or failures.

It should be remembered that the mythical image of Billy as outlaw-hero is a Romantic idea, as the figure of the Outsider is, from Goethe's Werner on, the central Romantic image; and that Nichol himself (as Ondaatje acknowledged in a recent interview) is a Romantic. This condemnation of history — as an impersonal process which coldly "stands back" from its subjects and thus judges rather than sympathises — is also a Romantic view. History may even be seen as the "official" view of an Establishment which has to reject all rebels and outlaws as "cowards or failures". It is only at a safe distance in time that a figure like Louis Riel can be "officially" viewed as a hero. The task of the rebel, then,

is not to stand back, but to get in there and “shoot history in the balls.” But Nichol’s Billy, being dead, can’t do this. In fact, as becomes clearer, Nichol’s Billy is the ultimate loser.

WHAT, THEN, IS BEYOND HISTORY? It is legend, or myth. This is the level at which Ondaatje’s book operates, but not Nichol’s: and this is one of the fundamental differences between them. For Nichol, legend is as much a liar as history:

legend says that billy the kid was a hero who liked to screw. the true eventual story is that were billy the kid alive he’d probably take legend out for a drink, match off in the bathroom, then blow him full of holes. legend always has a bigger dick than history and history has a bigger dick than billy had.

This view sees legend as more potent (literally as well as metaphorically) than history, but equally dangerous. And the danger lies precisely in its power, its stability, its vividness, its energy — all the qualities, in fact, of Ondaatje’s book. But Nichol’s Billy is at the bottom of the power structure, he always has the shortest dick. His status is that of the ultimate loser, and he is always ephemeral:

rumour has it that billy the kid never died. rumour is billy the kid. he never gets anywhere, being too short-lived.

This underlies the difference in length between the two books. It is not simply that Nichol’s is a small joke tossed off in fifteen paragraphs: the shortness, the casualness of the book are intrinsic to its view of Billy. The difference between Ondaatje’s 100 pages and Nichol’s 5 is the difference between legend and rumour. Ondaatje’s book *fixes* a certain view of the Kid into an intense, fully realized image; but for Nichol, the “eventual” truth is beyond even this, and his image of Billy is insubstantial, flickering, changing, dying. Ondaatje creates a myth; Nichol tells a joke.

Ondaatje’s mythmaking is a careful process, built up by various means, and he indicates in several ways the degree to which he is presenting a legendary or poetic image of the Kid. There is, for instance, the concern with photographs. The book opens with an account of photography at the time of Billy’s life, indicating the difficulty (which is also Ondaatje’s) of taking a sharp image of a moving object. Huffman, the photographer, claims to have succeeded: “spokes well defined — some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main.” In the same

way, Ondaatje has fixed an image of Nichol's evanescent rumour. The very fine cover, by Roger Silvester, uses an image by the early experimental photographer Muybridge, who made studies of the motions of people and animals through multiple exposures: again, there are possible analogies to Ondaatje's methods. But what the photograph shows is not always accurate: Paulita Maxwell claims that a photograph of Billy doesn't do him justice — surely an ironic phrase. Indeed, it was the reversed image of one famous photograph of Billy which led to the mistaken idea that he was left-handed. All contemporary authorities, including Garrett, remember Billy as right-handed; but his left-handedness fits in better with the legendary image of the outsider. Burns mentions Billy's being left-handed, but doesn't make anything of it; Ondaatje gives to Garrett a brilliantly sinister account of watching Billy subconsciously doing finger-exercises with his left hand. As already remarked, Ondaatje's subtitle, "Left Handed Poems" derives from Penn's film *The Left Handed Gun*.

The film image is a further way in which Ondaatje transforms the historical Billy into a legendary image. The sub-title casts the image of Penn's film across the whole book, and also recalls Penn's later masterpiece, *Bonnie and Clyde*, in which the outlaw figures are subjected to a mythologising process within the film itself. (As when, on their first meeting, Clyde asks Bonnie, "Are you a movie star?") Penn also is fascinated by photography: in both *The Left Handed Gun* and *Bonnie and Clyde* important scenes are devoted to the outlaws getting their pictures taken, and the image recurs in all Penn's films. Ondaatje uses comedy in much the same way as Penn: grotesque images of violence become almost simultaneously comic and horrible. Compare the poem about Gregory's death and the chicken with the scene in *The Left Handed Gun* where Billy's shotgun blast lifts Ollinger right out of his boots and leaves them standing, empty, on the street; a little girl starts laughing at the empty boots, until her mother's horrified slap stops her. In these scenes the humour works to intensify the image of violence; Ondaatje even succeeds in introducing a note of humour at the absolute climax of his story, as Garret is about to shoot Billy. A similar combination of violence and humour may be found in other of Ondaatje's favourite films, such as the Italian Westerns of Sergio Leone, or John Boorman's *Point Blank*. *Point Blank* also uses a fragmented time-scheme, with the same repeated, slow-motion, dreamlike exposures of violence as in Ondaatje's book. Further, *Point Blank*'s female lead is Angie Dickinson, and who should appear as Billy's sweetheart but "Miss Angela Dickinson of Tucson" — a name entirely of Ondaatje's own invention, not present in Burns nor in any "authentic" biography? The historical

reality of the Old West and its Hollywood myth representation meet each other in the brief story Ondaatje inserts of Frank James tearing tickets at a Los Angeles movie theatre. Finally, closely akin to the movie image is the comic-book legend which forms Billy's apotheosis. (Ondaatje's own film on bp Nichol, *Sons of Captain Poetry*, celebrates Nichol's fascination with old comics.) This is the final transformation of Billy in pop culture into the upright clean-living hero, as in a delightfully absurd film, which I saw several years ago and which Ondaatje told me he had also seen, *Billy the Kid vs. Dracula*.

But although Ondaatje's image of Billy the Kid may be influenced by the images of comic-books and the movies, these references are merely the context in which Ondaatje sets his own central image of Billy: and, as with Nichol, it is the book's title which points to the nature of that image.

Immediately after the quotation from Huffman, Ondaatje gives a list of "the killed". To Billy he ascribes 20 victims (curiously, for the usual legendary number is 21), most of whom, including the "blacksmith when I was twelve, with a knife", are totally unsubstantiated historically. Then he gives Garrett's victims, ending

. . . and Pat Garret  
sliced off my head.  
Blood a necklace on me all my life.

The strange, violent beauty of the image, together with the use of the first person, point towards the concept behind the title *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Ondaatje's legendary context for Billy is poetry; the transformation will be carried out mainly through the poetic image; the book will present Billy himself as an artist. Of course, "works" is ambiguous: it can also refer to Billy's actions, the killings. But Ondaatje is clearly working within the Romantic tradition of the artist as outsider, just as Samuel R. Delany in his novels is obsessed with the identity of the artist and the outlaw. Nichol's Billy "was not fast with words so he became fast with a gun", but for Ondaatje Billy's status as outlaw is intimately connected with the nature of his perception. He is placed outside society not only by what he does, but by the very way in which he sees the world:

The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky, in the air. Sometimes a normal forehead in front of me leaked brain gasses. Once a nose clogged right before me, a lock of skin formed over the nostrils, and the shocked face had to start breathing through the mouth, but then the mustache bound itself in the lower teeth and he began to gasp loud the hah! hah! going strong

— churned onto the floor, collapsed out, seeming in the end to be breathing out of his eye — tiny needle jets of air reaching into the throat. I told no one. If Angela D. had been with me then, not even her; not Sallie, John, Charlie, or Pat. In the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals.

Of course, Billy's poetic personality is not entirely distinct from Michael Ondaatje's. The concern with animals — apparent throughout the book — is familiar to any reader of Ondaatje's poetry. What results from the title "*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje" is in fact a composite figure: Billy the Kid, outlaw as artist, and Michael Ondaatje, artist as outlaw, meeting in one persona, which is part history, part legend, part aesthetic image, part creator of images. It is in terms of this complex persona that the book approaches its material.

That material may be seen as a narrative with two main strands: the conflict between Billy and Pat Garrett, culminating in the manhunt and the deaths of Tom O'Folliard, Charlie Bowdre, and Billy himself; and the opposite of conflict, the scenes of peace and companionship, centring on Miss Angela D. and the Chisum ranch. Underlying these two narrative strands is the central theme of violence, as it erupts in both outlaw and artist.

**B**UT FULLY AS IMPORTANT as what is in the book is what is missed out. Ondaatje has exercised great selectivity in his presentation of Billy, and what he deliberately omits or suppresses from his sources is of great interest. One thing that should be noted about the narrative structure outlined above is that it ignores, almost completely, what is for all the biographers, however "true" or "authentic", the most important event of Billy's life: the Lincoln County War. (Burns devotes over half of his book to it.) Ondaatje's one reference to it is in connection with the question of motivation:

A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup —

There follows Burns' account of Tunstall's murder, which he says Billy witnessed "from a distant hillside" having luckily been off "hunting wild turkeys." (In fact, it appears more probable that Billy was with Tunstall, and ran away.) Most apologists for Billy make this the central point of their exposition: Billy's career begins as an understandable search for vengeance on the murderers of his

idealistic and honest friend. "Others fought for hire," Burns claims; "Billy the Kid's inspiration was the loyalty of friendship." (Again, in fact it is certain that Tunstall was neither idealistic nor honest, and highly doubtful that he was especially friendly with Billy.) But the casual tone of Ondaatje's "yup" suggests that he does not take this idea too seriously, and there is no further mention of this stage of Billy's career. It is possible that this passage is introduced only to make fun of simplistic psychological "explanations" of the sources of Billy's violence. Ondaatje has more serious things to say on that subject.

Similarly, Nichol introduces an "explanation" of Billy's violence as a joke, but a joke with more serious implications. The central conceit of Nichol's book is the reversal of "Kid" to "Dick". Indeed, reversal of the normal image is Nichol's central tactic. So Nichol presents the extended joke that all Billy's activities were due to his having a small penis. At one level, this is a light-hearted version of the too easily oversimplified theory that guns are used as compensation by males with fears of sexual inadequacy. Nichol recognizes that this can be used too simplistically, and also makes fun of psychological determinist attitudes by revealing that "the sherrif had a short dick too, which was why he was sherrif & not out robbing banks. these things affect people differently." But behind these jokes is a serious awareness, present also in Ondaatje's book, of the tremendous force of the connection between violence and sexuality, and the centrality of these two aspects in contemporary American life. Make love not war -- if you can. And it is surely no accident that Nichol twice points out that Billy's short dick is "short for richard." Richard, that is, as in Nixon. The Lincoln County War has been represented as a clash between the "good guys", Tunstall and McSween, idealistic supporters of the small farmers, and the "bad guys", the oppressive monopoly of Murphy, Dolan, and Riley; in fact, it appears to have been a fairly cynical gang war for economic control of the territory, in which neither side shows to advantage. Most of the victims in the "war" were shot in the back or from ambush. Parallels to the VietNam war may be drawn at each reader's personal political discretion; but it does seem clear that Nichol is fully conscious of political applications, in his use of "richard", and again, later, in his cynical comment on one of Nixon's favourite slogans:

billy ran around shooting his mouth off, & the dicks off everybody else, & the sherrif stood on the sidelines cheering. this is how law & order came to the old west.



Nichol's jokes on Billy's motivation also touch lightly on a subject which is absolutely central to his own poetry: the power of language, the almost magical efficacy of words.

could they have called him instead billy the man or bloody bonney? would he have bothered having a faster gun? who can tell.

Again, the joke can be taken absolutely seriously. Names make you what you are; you become what you are called. The historical Billy went through several changes of name. He started life as William H. Bonney; when his father died, his mother reverted to her maiden name and he became Henry McCarty; she remarried, he became Henry Antrim; when he first began to run foul of the law he acquired the name The Kid; by his own choice he reverted to William H. Bonney; but to history and legend he is only Billy the Kid. The naming is all-important: it fixes the image, it creates the personality. In Nichol's study of Billy's motivation, that noncommittal "who can tell" is the most loaded phrase of all.

Having rejected any "historical" explanation in terms of the Lincoln County War, and omitting also such legendary accretions as Billy's youthful murder of a loafer who had insulted his mother, Ondaatje presents Billy's violence in terms of the poetic image of energy: the energy necessary to both outlaw and artist. The central text for this is the poem on page 41 :

I have seen pictures of great stars,  
drawings which show them straining to the centre  
that would explode their white  
if temperature and the speed they moved at  
shifted one degree.

Or in the East have seen  
the dark grey yards where trains are fitted  
and the clean speed of machines  
that make machines, their  
red golden pouring which when cooled  
mists out to rust or grey.

The beautiful machines pivoting on themselves  
sealing and fusing to others  
and men throwing levers like coins at them.  
And there is the same stress as with stars,  
the one altered move that will make them maniac.

Energy tightly controlled by form is one definition of a work of art; and in art the "one altered move" will result in the dissipation of energy, a bad poem. Or, when the energy of the work of art is directly expressive of violence, and when it is transmitted in a context where such artistic controls as irony are severely compromised, then the "one altered move" can be physically destructive beyond the aesthetic bounds, as in the case of the murder by the Hell's Angels during the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont. Ondaatje's book depicts the shattering of the precarious control over the energy of Billy's violence, and the violence he evokes in those around him; the events then drive inexorably towards his death. There is a close relationship here to the previously mentioned two strands of narrative: the scenes of control are (mainly, but not exclusively) associated with the Chisums and Angela D.; the "one altered move" is (mainly, but not exclusively) Pat Garrett. And, despite Billy's statement that "the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals", both the harmony and the maniac destruction are most clearly seen in the animal references.

The first of Ondaatje's images of harmony, of what might be called the "pastoral interludes" in the book, comes in the description of Billy's weeklong stay in a deserted barn. Here, attracted by "the colour and the light", he stays to get rid of a fever. "It became a calm week" in which Billy and the animals are able to live together in harmony.

There were animals who did not move out and accepted me as a larger breed. I ate the old grain with them, drank from a constant puddle about twenty yards away, ate his disease and kept it in him. When I walked I avoided the cobwebs squat the best way when shitting, used leaves for wiping, never ate flesh or touched another animal's flesh, never entered his boundary. We were all aware and allowed each other. The fly who sat on my arm, after his inquiry, just went away, ate his disease and kept it in him. When I walked I avoided the cobwebs, who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw.

But if this image of harmony is presented in terms of animals, it is also in terms of animals that the "one altered move" breaks in and destroys this scene: rats eat grain fermented by rain and become maniac, killing a chipmunk, eating each other, until Billy, with "the noise breaking out the seal of silence in my ears", exhausts his bullet supply in shooting them. At the end "no other animal of any kind remained in that room", except the human with his gun. This brief scene is a paradigm for what is to come later, at the Chisum ranch.

**I**F A WRITER'S INTENTIONS can be most clearly seen in the places where he most drastically alters his source material, then Ondaatje's metamorphosis of the Chisums must be the very centre of his work. The impression that Ondaatje's book gives is that the Chisum ranch is a fairly small place, out in the desert miles from anywhere, inhabited only by Sallie and John, who is seen as a gentle, peace-loving man with little interest or influence in the world beyond his ranch. In fact, John Chisum was one of the largest and most influential landowners and cattlemen in the territory; and Burns describes the ranch thus:

Chisum abandoned Bosque Grande as his headquarters in 1873, and moving down the Pecos forty miles, established South Spring Ranch, which remained his home to the end of his life. Where the South Spring River gushes from the earth in a never-failing giant spring of crystal water, he built a home fit for a cattleking and made it one of the show places of the Southwest. Cottonwood trees brought from Las Vegas by mule pack-train he planted about his dwelling and in two winding rows that formed a noble avenue a quarter of a mile long leading from road to residence. He sowed eight hundred acres to alfalfa. He brought fruit trees from Arkansas and set out a vast acreage in orchards of apple, pear, peach, and plum. He imported roses from Texas to make a hedge about the house, and scarlet tanagers and bob-white quail from Tennessee — birds unknown to New Mexico — and set them at liberty in the oasis of beauty he had created.

Here, with royal hand, Chisum dispensed frontier hospitality. His great, rambling, one-story adobe house, with verandas at front and rear, stood on the highway between Texas and New Mexico, and the stranger was as free as the invited guest to bed and board for as long as he wanted to stay, and no money or questions asked. Every day at breakfast, dinner, and supper, the table in the dining hall was set for twenty-six guests, twelve on each side and one at each end, and hardly a meal was served in ten years at which every chair was not occupied.

Ondaatje has not merely "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked the originals"; he has made a complete, vivid, and detailed creation in absolute opposition to his original.

Ondaatje's suppression of the Lincoln County War also involves his omitting the facts that Chisum was the chief (though silent) force behind the Tunstall-McSween faction, and that after the war there was considerable conflict between Chisum and Billy, who claimed that Chisum owed him money for his part in the fighting. Burns quotes Sallie Chisum as attempting to discount this conflict, but there are persistent stories of Billy rustling Chisum's cattle, and, in some

more imaginative versions, killing Chisum's cowboys. In a letter to Governor Lew Wallace, December 12th, 1880, Billy blamed accusations against him on "the impression put out by Chisum and his tools". Steckmesser speculates that Joe Grant, one of Billy's victims, "may well have been hired by Chisum or another cattleman to remove the troublesome Kid". Even Burns, who downplays the whole conflict, admits that Chisum was responsible, along with other local cattle barons, for hiring Pat Garrett to get rid of Billy, and that their motives for this were primarily commercial. All this is totally changed or omitted in Ondaatje's version. It may also be noted that Garrett's own account never mentions his meeting Billy at the Chisum ranch, either for the first or any other time. (Garrett is, of course, understandably reticent about his early friendship with Billy.)

The image presented in Ondaatje's book is, then, largely his own invention; and the pains he has taken to alter his source material indicate the importance he attaches to it. The Chisum ranch is the "still centre" of Billy's world. It is a place of peace, of affection, of comradeship. None of the apologists for Billy as a poor misunderstood child driven against his will to violence have ever provided him with such a beautiful and fully realized context for his "true nature": but Ondaatje succeeds in doing this without in the least sentimentalising Billy.

The first presentation occurs in Billy's mind as he and Angela D. ride towards the house "Forty miles ahead of us". As they approach Billy remembers in a wealth of loving details the small, everyday details of the life of John and Sallie Chisum: the remains of breakfast, their wordless "dialogue of noise", the shutters which made the house "silent and dark blue with sunless quiet", and Sallie herself, in her bare feet,

like a ghost across the room moving in white dresses, her hair knotted as always at the neck and continuing down until it splayed and withered like eternal smoke half way between the shoulder blades and the base of cobble spine.

Yes. In white long dresses in the dark house, the large bones somehow taking on the quietness of the house. Yes I remember.

These ethereal images of peace and beauty are reinforced by the solid human friendship, the recollections of long evenings on the porch when "we have talked slowly through nights expecting the long silences and we have taken our time thinking the replies." Even throwing up after a long night's drinking becomes a kind of act of community; and it is significant that Garrett is specifically excluded from it, just as he falls asleep during the conversation on the porch.

Again, this is a detail specifically altered from Burns' book, where Sallie Chisum describes Garrett as often being "the life of the company that used to sit on the porch of an evening."

Angela D. fits into this world: Billy brings her to it. (Garrett arrives on his own, by accident, and is "deaf" when he arrives.) The most graphic of the sexual scenes between Billy and Angela D. takes place at the Chisum ranch, and Billy wakes there to the vision of "Beautiful ladies in white rooms in the morning".

But, as in the Pastoral tradition, *et in Arcadia ego*, elements of disruption are present even in this perfectly achieved harmony, balance, control of energy. Indeed, the indications of the "one altered move" are introduced, typically, at the very centre of the harmony, Sallie Chisum's love of animals. The first description of the Chisum ranch ends with an account of Sallie's strange collection of pet animals: "the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded." John Chisum takes Billy out to the cages in darkness: "You could peer into a cage and see nothing till a rattle of claws hit the grid an inch from your face and their churning feathers seemed to hiss." There is the bizarre image of the one-eyed owls, the intense realization of the animals' presence and awareness, which "continued like that all night while we slept." Despite the love which Sallie obviously bears for these animals, the atmosphere of the scene is sinister, filled with impending violence. Billy feels himself to be standing on "the edge of the dark" and concludes "The night, the dark air, made it all mad." The madness and violence break out immediately in a poem in which mad rats fight in Billy's head, horses foam white with madness, and a deadly barracuda floats in his brain.

Another extended episode at the Chisum ranch is John's horrifying story of the man who systematically breeds a group of dogs into madness until they turn on him and rip him to pieces. The story is shatteringly out of place in the calm and beautiful atmosphere of the ranch; Sallie comments, to her dog, "Aint that a nasty story Henry, aint it? Aint it nasty." Henry, like Ondaatje's own dog, is a basset; Henry is also what the H. stands for in William H. Bonney.

Garrett's presence at the Chisums' is another signal of disruption, and it is Garrett who narrates the story of Billy killing Sallie's snake-bitten cat. The imagery is closely tied together: it is this event which, according to Garrett, terrifies Angela D.; the account of Angela's shot arm immediately precedes the narrative of the night of slow talking and drinking from which Garrett is so pointedly excluded; and the beauty of the morning after is brought to an end when Billy sees that "On the nail above the bed the black holster and gun is

coiled like a snake." Another careful juxtaposition is that between Billy's shooting the cat and the first flashforward to the final shooting; and this flashforward begins:

Down the street was a dog. Some mut spaniel, black and white. One dog, Garrett and two friends, stud looking, came down the street to the house, to me.

As a final touch to this continual association of animals and violence, Ondaatje tells us, right at the end of the book, just before the climactic description of Billy's death, that Garrett also liked animals: but not live ones, like Sallie Chisum. Pat Garrett stuffed dead birds.

**B**UT GARRETT is an essential part of Billy's legend. Many reasons can be given for the longevity of that legend — Billy's youth; the attractiveness, admitted even by his enemies, of his personality; the possibility of seeing him as fighting on the "right" side of the Lincoln County War; the fact that most of his victims in one sense or another deserved what they got; the exotic Mexican background — but one of the strongest motifs is that of Betrayal. Kent Ladd Steckmesser says of this point:

The theme of "betrayal" has been carefully pointed up by Bonney's biographers and has gripped the folk imagination. Time and again we are told that the Kid would have settled down and become a law-abiding citizen if only the man hunters had given him half a chance. But Governor Wallace "double-crossed" the Kid by reneging on a promise of an amnesty. Garrett was a Judas who tracked down his friend for a few silver dollars. The story unfolds like a classical Greek drama, with the tragic hero moving inexorably toward death by treachery.

Just as Robin Hood had his Sheriff of Nottingham and Jesse James had Robert Ford, Billy the Kid had Pat Garrett. As has already been remarked, their fates are linked in legend as in life. So long as Billy was regarded as an extravagantly evil villain, Garrett was a hero, saviour of law and order, etc.; but as the view of Billy changes, Garrett becomes the betrayer, the manhunter, the assassin. (In 1908, Garrett was himself assassinated, in circumstances which have never been fully explained.) This is, essentially, the approach which Ondaatje takes; but Nichol, characteristically, takes the whole idea and stands it on its head.

Nichol's version of Pat Garrett is "the sherrif" (sic), and

the true eventual story is billy & the sherrif were friends. if they had been more aware they would have been lovers. they were not more aware.

Nichol's sherrif does not betray Billy: Billy is betrayed by history, by legend, by god, and ultimately by himself, but not by the sherrif. Indeed, the sherrif occupies in Nichol's book much the place that Angela D. occupies in Ondaatje's. Nichol takes the idea of the symbiosis which binds together hero and villain, hunter and hunted, assassin and victim, and turns it into an identity of interests directed against the outside world. The sherrif shares Billy's predicament, but, as already noted, "these things affect people differently." The sherrif simply "stood on the sidelines cheering." This can of course be read as a cynical comment on the collusion between lawmen and criminals; but it seems more important as Nichol's only expression of community, of a harmonious relationship between two people. The two outsiders, losers of society, join together; their friendship is beautiful, the fact that they "were not more aware" is tragic, the farewell they take of each other is touching in its simplicity. Again, Nichol's surface tone is one of light-hearted joking, but the words he puts down can be taken perfectly seriously. And the sherrif does not destroy Billy: Billy in the end destroys himself, as his own violence catches up with him in a furiously self-destructive joke:

the true eventual story is that billy the kid shot it out with himself. there was no-one faster. he snuck up on himself & shot himself from behind the grocery store.

Nichol's Billy is in fact a much more violent character than Ondaatje's: but he is not betrayed. Whatever God, history, or legend say, rumour and the sherrif remain true to him. They deny the impositions of history and legend, presenting instead, clearly and strongly, a reversed image. The subtitle "Left Handed Poems" could well be applied more accurately to Nichol's book than to Ondaatje's. In the reversed photo image, William H. Bonney becomes The Left Handed Gun; and Pat Garrett, strangely but not without beauty, becomes a sherrif not quite aware enough to be a lover.

Ondaatje's view of Garrett is more conventional; and here it should be noted that Ondaatje's highly selective presentation of Billy's history involves a very strong bias against Garrett. As already noted, Ondaatje omits any account of Billy's early activities, such as his murders in the Lincoln County War, and presents him mainly in two contexts: the peace and beauty of the Chisum ranch, and the final chase and manhunt. In other words, Billy is seen almost entirely as victim. There are three extended accounts of killings in the book — those of Tom O'Folliard, Charlie Bowdre, and Billy himself — and in every case the killer is Garrett. We never get any similar account of a killing by Billy. Even in

the strange and bizarre account of the killing of Gregory (whoever he is supposed to be) Ondaatje is careful to have Billy say that:

I'd shot him well and careful  
made it explode under his heart  
so it wouldn't last long

In other words, Billy is a humane murderer; the gruesome images which follow can be blamed on the chicken, not Billy. There is a detailed narrative of the chase and of the tortures Billy suffers in captivity, but only the sketchiest idea is given of Billy's escape from jail, and his murder of Bell and Ollinger. Ondaatje concentrates instead on the depiction of Ollinger as a sadistic villain: a device, largely invented by Burns, which has no historical basis whatever. In short, Ondaatje stacks his deck. If the reader reacts in horror or disgust from the violence in the book, he is reacting mainly *against* Garrett. Although Ondaatje's Billy is far from a blameless character, there is a definite implication that the violence exists around him rather than in him; Nichol's farcical conclusion gives a far greater sense of a character destroyed from within by his own violence. The interconnectedness of Garrett and Billy works inexorably: if Nichol makes Garrett a friend, then the violence has to shift back to Billy, while the more Ondaatje presents Pat Garrett as the assassin, the man-hunter, the more he whitewashes his Billy.

Garrett is presented as "that rare thing — a sane assassin". Ondaatje's account of his early life gives a plausible background of psychological motivation for Garrett's suppression of emotion; but it stresses that even before Juanita's death Garrett was capable of efforts of will such as his learning French and learning to drink. Garrett "comes to chaos neutral": but his neutrality cuts him off from any contact with humanity, so that his violence becomes cold and inhuman. Twice we have the picture of his victims (Tom O'Folliard and Charlie Bowdre) staggering towards him in death; in each case he stands unmoved, waiting for them to die. Even his reaction to Billy's death is reported in a totally unemotional manner. Garrett, more than any other single factor in the book, is that "one altered move" that makes everything around him "maniac." The word itself is echoed in the description of Billy's arm breaking through the window after the shooting:

Guitterrez goes to hold the arm but it is manic, breaks her second finger. His veins that controlled triggers — now tearing all they touch.

Nichol's Billy destroys himself; but Ondaatje's is destroyed by something outside



himself, something that itself remains calm and indestructible: and therefore, all the more terrifying. Garrett's character thus presents an interesting paradox: he is himself an embodiment of order, control; yet in contact with Billy he becomes the "altered move" which produces chaos.

Or is it chaos? It is violence, certainly, and death; but there is a kind of direction to it. Within the terms of the legend, it is an inexorable progress, and what it ends in is not Billy's death but Billy's apotheosis into legend: the creation, that is, of an aesthetic image. If Billy is one image of the artist, then surely Pat Garrett, even if his material is dead bodies, like his birds, is another? *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is, after all, a tightly controlled book: Ondaatje is a careful artist, and the images of violence are never allowed to get out of hand in the book. The book is not chaos, the book is not manic. It is an attempt to comprehend the legend of Billy the Kid, to see him as one of the exemplary figures of modern consciousness, outlaw as artist, artist as outlaw. He is involved with violence, but the violence results from the conflict between himself and his society, it is a product of his symbiotic relationship with Pat Garrett. Ondaatje's final image of Billy sees him waking up after a bad night: the smell of smoke, the stain of violence, is still with him — but only in his shirt, which can be changed. We turn the page and find a photograph of a small boy smiling in a cowboy outfit: Billy's costume of violence turned into an image, a toy. That small boy is Michael Ondaatje, poet.

Ondaatje's Billy does not have the substantiality of history; his history is changed and fashioned into something else: legend, the aesthetic image in all its depth and detail, its vividness and force. Nichol's Billy is, in its way, a much more radical image of the outsider's consciousness, for it rejects any notion of substance whatever. His Billy is rumour, and essentially short-lived, like the smoke which Ondaatje's Billy sees on his ceiling, ready to blow away whenever a window is opened. His energy dissipates itself, sneaks up behind and shoots itself. Yet Nichol's is also a carefully crafted and constructed book. The surface seems superficial and whimsical, yet the words will always yield a serious meaning if you give them a chance. Perhaps rumour is that way too. The truth lies only in what the words can say, and what they say is never fixed. It is a process, an event, a becoming; the truth is always eventual.

Such as, for example, the "truth" that on July 14th, 1881, in Pete Maxwell's dark bedroom, Pat Garrett shot Billy the Kid just above the heart, and the next day, "neatly and properly dressed" (according to Garrett), he was buried in the military cemetery at Old Fort Sumner, in the state of New Mexico.

# AVISON'S IMITATION OF CHRIST THE ARTIST

*George Bowering*

**I**N A REVIEW ARTICLE about *The Dumbfounding* (in *Canadian Literature* 38), Lawrence M. Jones makes reference to an unpublished essay that Margaret Avison composed about her relationship with Christ and its effect upon her work. Looking back on her early poetry, she announces "how grievously I cut off his way by honouring the artist" during her "long wilful detour into darkness". Readers of Miss Avison's work will know that such a confession does not lead to her abandoning poetic care and plunging into artless canticles of devotional verse. She is not compulsively looking for security, as Germaine Greer would put it. Of all our poets, Margaret Avison is the most artfully daring. In the same article she speaks of the progress of her personal belief from the "will to be good", to "getting to be where Christ's suffering goes, terribly on."

Like the "metaphysical" poets, Miss Avison plays on paradox, and theirs, her belief, religious or artistic, depends on the paradox not being that at all. She does not abandon the artist — she just does not any longer honour him. Honouring an artist is for non-reading people or poetry-commissars to do; or if the artist is Christ himself, for church ministers to do. Honouring a prophet in his own country is to kill prophecy. There is no honour in that.

Miss Avison says that her personal vision of Christ, which has been till now often enough referred to, made the New Testament story unclear. The New Testament story is fine, for people interested in stories. But its reading tends to set the main character in time and place, even if the place is imagined in the mind of the child who is suffered to read it. It becomes a part of the world stuffed in at your eyes. In her later poems written about and to Christ, Miss

Avison insists on an active reader. She makes lines that snap off all over the page and off it, threatening to destroy the poem in favour of something else. She wants no passive reader, for the poetry or for the worlds of the God she lives with. She knows the paradox known by John Donne and G. M. Hopkins: if the poem would lead your heart to God, it must evaporate on the trail to his language. That is impossible, but it is the ideal that the most serious poet must try to make real. Success must be foregone from the outset, but success would be the reward and source of pride.

In a poem called "First" (*The Dumbfounding*, 51), Miss Avison advises that "In the mathematics of God/ there are percentages beyond one hundred". It is left for the human, calculator or artist, to strive for a hundred per cent. Given that no one less than a saint can hope to achieve that, Hopkins tried to imitate the more-than-perfect by spilling over the normal low-percentage confines of the sonnet, an obviously earthly form. Margaret Avison is led to a similar striving.

Always swim in water that is over your head. Ski a slope that is frighteningly steep. Keep trying for excellence you think you do not have in you, and pay the most intense attention to all your movements. You will know that your limits (or the poem's) are expanding, and all the time you will be reminded of your mortality. There is no time for pride there, but what you will have done will speak of, hint of, perceptions not totally available to human knowledge. A short poem that shows this kind of striving is "In Eporphyrical Harness" (*TD*, 77):

Hill-hoe  
till the liberal varnish, the  
daze-sun go  
down and the pin-  
flare-  
finish  
star-bright  
become alltoday, furnish  
us sun (eyes) (ice).

Here every moment of the poem, including those moments between words, is supercharged, made to do more work than the normal speaker or writer would ever demand. With all the simultaneities of pun, rime, juncture, and so on, we feel the poet trying to do more than words can accomplish, to tell of more than the perceptrs can fix. The process is the opposite and enemy of explanation, which means taking a knowledgeable position to lay it out flat. Margaret Avison never settles for that dimension:

Excessive gladness can drag  
the 3-dimensional uncircumferenced circle  
out of its sublime true  
unless contrition also past all bound  
extend it.

(TD, 51)

So Christ, and his works, cannot be explained. The dogma of 2000 years ago and that of today are futile attempts to get control of history. Something like that futility is applicable in the consideration of poetry. Conventional minds always want to speak of the poet's "success" or "failure" in terms of how much control he has over his material. Margaret Avison says that the poet, reader, poem, should participate, not dominate, should be used by things even as we use them. In a poem called "Hot June" she shows how the acts of composition lead in a sharing way toward eternity, from where everything comes together in its own place:

People are pink-cheekt only  
long enough to  
ferret out what if we were man and wiser we  
would let  
be.

Give us the word and we worry  
it out of its soil and run  
off with it  
(IN-FORM) between our teeth  
and *have at it* and set up a  
branch office to  
do it for  
people.

And o the zeal of thy cheek,  
the tired plumes trailing  
home!

Dust composes its late sunlight petals, ribbands, metals,  
shorelessness.

(TD, 82)

When Christ composes himself before her eyes she does not ask him how he got there, as many people do when someone shows up unexpectedly. She is dumb-founded.

The silence of the dust motes landing, the silence of the dumbfounded — the place to begin composition, and the state of perfection for which to strive. The process begins when the discursive and orderly mind learns to shut up and the optic heart looks and feels. Ernest Redekop, in his book on Margaret Avison, has it right: "She makes it clear that perception forms and determines conception; that how we see determines what we are." The poems urge the eye to zoom back and forth, refusing to employ perspective (see "Perspective," in *Poetry of Mid-Century 1940-1960*, edited by Milton Wilson) because perspective places the self up close, in the centre, and everything growing smaller and less distinct in the distance. That is why her favourite word or combining word is "all," as in "alltoday" or "allgathering", or as it is suggested in such a word as "shorelessness". She holds a similar view of time, not seeing a distance of the past or of literature, especially regarding the presence of Christ. In "Dispersed Titles" (*Winter Sun*, 3), for instance, the sixteenth and twentieth centuries are sewn together. The poet wants to welcome and hopes to produce epiphanies, less-than-moments when there is light from eternity shining through a rent in the fabric of time.

MEN FABRICATE the perspectives of time and space in order to place themselves at the centre of phenomena. What is needed is a lesson in humility. The greatest lesson in humility is the sacrifice of Christ, who is either God or his son or both. His becoming the Christ depends on his epiphanic conversion from immortal visitor to pain-taking man, the prime moment when he suffers doubt and utters faith on the cross. That moment when he doubted his divinity opened his divine heart to a sharing of all men's condition. It was the moment when he was the farthest from being honoured, and in Margaret Avison's eyes the moment of greatest artistic inspiration. Christ gave himself up to Keats' negative capability, and thus lost all perspective, being no further from any one person than another, through all time and space.

There is the Christ that the artist should try to imitate. In a letter to Cid Corman (published in *Origin*, January 1962) Miss Avison said that her unrelenting care for the exactitudes of composition would have its value in reaching the optic heart of the amateur reader, not the priests of poetry:

Poetry over against the world — if such could exist, I'd stay on the world's side. This is too vague a statement. Aaron Copland says: "When I speak of the gifted listener I am thinking of the nonmusician primarily, of the listener who intends

to retain his amateur status. *It is the thought of just such a listener that excites the composer in me. . . .*"

[*The italicized words are Miss Avison's.*]

The poet is that way about her Christianity, too. Her life has embraced the work she does in the academic community, and social work, which has incidentally included writing for journals on the subject, and working among the down-and-out in Toronto. Both her life and her poetry are highly conscious responses to various figures of Christ, who was a scholar who worked among the outcast. Consider the place where Christ, after a search, is found, in the poem, "Searching and Sounding" (*TD*, 60-62) :

in the sour air  
of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom;  
not in Gethsemane's grass, perfumed with prayer,  
but here,  
seeking to cool the gray-stubbed cheek  
and the filth-choked throat  
and the scalding self-loathing heart . . .

That poem is, among other things, Miss Avison's greatest statement about the artist and his making of art. She has written about the artist often during her more than three decades of poetry. "The Artist" (*WS*, 40; *TD*, 91) is a complicated story of a person pursuing a white cat around an indifferent city, becoming Hansel and Gretel, entering the deep forest of the imagination, but escaping from it undevoured and well-fed, and probably in possession of the cat. He had fallen in love with the witch, but he burned her to ashes and ate her house. One gets the impression that Miss Avison is far from honouring the artist here.

The image of the artist choosing self-interested success over being consumed by the dark witch in the forest of imagination is echoed in "The Agnes Cleves Papers". Garnet, the failed artist, failed because he accepted commercial reward and family praise and the urging to work for a living. He failed because he stayed with the familiar tangible world of himself rather than allowing his self to disappear into the care of the unknown. He was afraid of negative capability; it might steal his car if he didn't leave it locked under a street lamp. Miss Avison's poetry is filled with the message to let it go.

That is not a call for the artist-poet to give up craft in his making. In a letter to bp Nichol (tipped into Nichol's *Journeying and the Returns*) Miss Avison commends him for giving so much without giving it away. It is rather a call for

the artist to give up selfishness, or even to give up self. It is really no paradox to say that when the poet goes to the full extent of what his individual skill can accomplish, he will see his art become not his but not-his. The concerns are meta-physical. The artist, it is suggested, may become aware of all his (limited) faculties, and then do what the blind man does in section XIV of "The Earth that Falls Away":

Then I could move  
out among the trees and traffic, a march  
in Nomansland to risk it, a dive  
into invisible interdependence, no crutch  
needed, for all the dread.

(TD, 44)

In "The Swimmer's Moment" (WS, 36) the few people who acknowledge the whirlpool they are caught in give up the individual contest with nature and go beyond it (the meaning of the meta-physical) to "the mysterious, and more ample, further waters", to "the silver reaches of the estuary". But remember that if their skill, their art, be not practiced, they will simply drown. The metaphor is at once religious and artistic.

But why step into the water in the first place? (In one instance Miss Avison says that it is Heraclitus' stream without banks.) In a short poem called "Un-speakable" (beautiful title, as simple as a rose) it is heard that the reason for making art is to share in the beauty of creation, to make its less-seen parts seen. The artist is in a way an *assistant* to creation or Creation.

All men and women, all creatures, are joined because they have their rising from the same earth, the same sea. Hence order is a given, it is a beginning, there is a received order to be discovered and carried out, and creation keeps on going on. In people, who wonder most about that order, the discoverer is the imagination. Hence the act of making poetry is to find out where people may join in recognition, by means of the imagination. Thus poetry (or spiritual praise) cannot properly be served by the notion that the mind or the spirit may be liberated and separated from matter. Form is simply how the body of the matter is perceived. Reason cannot be removed except by sham from the seeming unreason it is born in. Like a blind man in a city, or a swimmer in fast water, the artist will participate, not dominate. He will be used by things even as he uses them. He will be of some use, and so will his art.

MUSIC IS PART of the received order the poet participates in. Music, as Carlyle said, is at the heart of all things and does not have to be applied to them. The depth of the artist's vision reveals music. It exposes form, never imposes it. Like Hopkins, and for similar reasons, Margaret Avison sings whenever she sees something of surpassing beauty. In fact the singing aids the eye. "Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes./ The optic heart must venture." (*WS*, 17). Thus the title of a great poem, "Searching and Sounding" (*TD*, 60-62). The title rimes with "The Dumbfounding," and each title's multiplicity of meanings is augmented by the association with the other.

Searching and sounding involve the eye and the ear by way of the voice. But they are involved not passively — the poet is not a witness merely. She believes with another great woman poet, H.D., that one's poetry should be involved with discovering the "other-half of the tree". The optic heart searches among the forest and sounds the depth of the sea, especially where Christ is nailed or where he walked.

So the poem begins by making the reader's eye do its share of work, involving the reader physically, as something like an artist if not that:

In July this early sky is  
a slope-field, a tangled  
shining — blue-green, moist, in  
heaped up pea-vines, in milk-hidden  
tendrils . . .

Visual things are made to happen as the eye is moved back and forth (destroying evaluative perspective), a scene that another poet might leave to the interpreting mind, in what is called description.

Immediately the eye's work is seen to lead the observer to the edge of the margin between his theoretical 100% and heaven's uttermore:

in light so strong  
it seems a shadow of  
further light, were the heart  
large enough to find its succulence  
and feed and not be glutted there.

The truly worshipful person or artist desires more than that intimation of immortality, and sets about seeking a way (at least) to make the intimation a



brighter aperture in heaven's cloak. For the Christian, the searching finds its source and objective:

I look for you  
who only know the  
melding and the forming of such heart

— and so Christ appears as the meta-human artist, the *maker* who can observe or perhaps perform the creation of life, the model for the human artist.

But where does the poet find that artist? In the last stanza of "The Dumbfounding" (*TD*, 59), Miss Avison makes ingenious use of syntax simultaneously to ask that Christ

lead through the garden to  
trash, rubble, hill

and to observe that he does. Here he is found (where part of Copland's audience might be found):

in the sour air  
of a morning-after rooming-house hall-bedroom;  
not in Gethsemane's grass, perfumed with prayer,

that is, not locked in church, not locked in the safety of history or the approved literature, not locked in anywhere, not placed captive in niche or on pedestal, on mantel or in shrine. In an earlier poem decrying the fixity of sonnet or crypt ("Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets," *WS*, 19), Miss Avison asks at last: "Might sheened and rigid trophies strike men blind/ like Adam's lexicon locked in the mind?"

Christ, or the image of Christ so far seen, is seen here doing his own "seeking", as in his recorded time,

to cool the gray-stubbed cheek  
and the filth-choked throat  
and the scalding self-loathing heart, and  
failing . . .

Failing? How can the perfect artist fail? I feel that it must be because nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes, because art, even perfect art, is impossible without its connections. (Though I have a nagging feeling that the problem here is in the hint of the earlier syntax:

I look for you  
who only know the  
melding and the forming of such heart

— *i.e.*, that the search was for one who has the “only” there to modify the following predicate.) But if the question is difficult, the solution to it is likely to be found in the succeeding syntax:

failing, for he is  
sick,  
for I . . .

Attending the ambiguities discovered by a mind caught in its own lyric snags, we may receive the sense that we are to find our way through a Blakean sympathy or synthesis of persons, in this case of Christ-poet-other. Certainly the next section of the poem would suggest that. (When one says, for instance, “he is/ sick,/ for I,” that “I” may equally refer in this case, to a number of versions of the self-awareness of persons.)

In long lush rhythms now the poet tells how she runs away from Christ to be captured by his presence everywhere, including her own space. She finds that she cannot wholly distinguish herself from the slumped man in the boarding house, or from a “mentally distracted” youth who needs the hand of nearby Christ to save him from slumping. His hand may be taught the use of axe or throttle-bar or grease gun, “any craft or art”. What saves a person from loss is the artist in him, then, Christ as the artist in people. The poet hopes to know her craft or art as useful and connected with the divine as those others. We are somewhere short of God’s 100 + %, but because of his grace we are not at or below zero, even though we may try to run in that direction. Run the speaker of the poem does, away from Christ (always “him” with a small “h”), she thinks, toward “something human,/ somebody now, here, with me.” But as Miss Avison says in the poem called “The Christian’s Year in Miniature,” (*TD*, 65), “From the timeless verge/ you moved, to our *now*.” The searching and sounding of the title are the attributes of an artist in his action, but (as mentioned earlier) that action is shared, even when the artist is that perfect one. The mortal human being can try to be as elusive as the right word for a poem:

So now we flee the Garden  
Of Eden, steadfastly.  
And still in our flight are ardent  
For lost eternity.

(“The Mirrored Man,” *WS*, 71)

"Steadfastly" means standing still, and we are standing "still in our flight". What kind of running is this? It is our moving in time, "till time be full", as seen from eternity, where all time can be caught in less than an instant, and you cannot run away from it, nor would.

The Christ of grace, though, makes gentle pursuit, appearing this time as musical artist:

But you have come and sounded  
a music around me, newly . . .

The ambiguity here is the quickest and most sure figure of speech, drawing together as it does so much of what has been said by Miss Avison, and so much to come. For instance, the first line of the above quotation produces an image of a Christ far deeper, for an adult, than that in the biblical "story" of the Jesus who walks on the water.

Furthermore, that ambiguity intensifies the synthesis of Christ-artist-other, in the succeeding stanza:

as though you can clear  
all tears from our eyes only  
if we sound the wells of weeping with  
another's heart, and hear  
another's music only.

Here, as usual, Miss Avison sees that compassion for another, getting out of the wanting self, are the attributes of the Christian, the human resemblance to Jesus, a Jesus not "sacrificed" but become the Christ. Further again, Miss Avison works the grammar as far as possible, so that the "we" of the stanza can include the addressed Christ.

So the light deepens, as dark is supposed to do, as the summer day, what Miss Avison calls the "daze-sun" elsewhere, goes down. The speaker of the poem is then as far from the garden as possible, led by Jesus to the mournful desert of bones and famine and "howling among the tombs", to his version of hangover rooming house, where he is needed and must go on his way back to paradise. They go, as Miss Avison's poems often do, to the shoreline, where the gravel is ground by the apocalypse horses, to where the artist must begin his work, from nothing; they proceed

To what strange fruits in  
the ocean's orchards?

The imagination wonders about them. The perfect imagination creates *all* new, so that there is needed

no further making — *all* newness —  
*all* being . . .

Yet, says the devout poet, if all possible to see is seen, it is seen as only a fragment of the fullness Christ put off to be with mortal creatures.

Seeing the perfect artist in action, the poet becomes part of the action in imitating him to her limits. The picture is far different from Eliot's shoring himself up with the fragments left of a broken past European civilization. Miss Avison wants with the help of Jesus to

GATHER my fragments towards  
the radium, the  
all-swallowing moment  
once more.

Here is an artist who believes that the universe expands and contracts, not that it is wearing down. Jesus the artist is still doing his life studies; he is not locked inside the museum or nave of art history.

A FEW YEARS AGO, in hip circles, there was an invocation going around: May the baby Jesus shut your mouth and open your mind. In Margaret Avison's experience it is an artist Christ who does that job. "The Dumbfounding" is the central Christian poem in her work, and as usual her work there is saturated with meanings at all points. In the sense that the poem tells a story, it tells the usual story of the innovative artist from whom in his own country is

withheld all honor: "His house is clay,  
how can he tell us of his far country?"

So he goes the normal route of ridicule, distrust, attempts by the critics to nail him down to their established dimensions, accusations of outlandishness and blasphemy, neglect and abandonment so that he must do his greatest work alone, and finally a gathering to the bosom (in this case, often in the form of gold) of the culture only after he is gone so that he may be spoken of as immortal and "ours".

As usual, the title of the poem combines several senses of the word found there. Often in her poems Miss Avison has mentioned the desperate failure of human chattering, and speaking of her own visitation by Jesus, she said that the telling of stories about him became nonsense for her afterwards. She was dumb-founded, made speechless by surprise. In this poem the reader is moved from an apostle's story of the life into an awareness that the framing of such story makes no sense if the main character is still among us, experiencing all stages of his life and our own at all moments. The present participle of the title is not lost in a noun. The founding has to continue while the eternal heat of the forge remains, while there are still those who remain lost, those prodigals.

To begin the poem the voice speaks for the people who were around during the specific four-gospels time:

When you walked here,  
took skin, muscle, hair,  
eyes, larynx, we  
withheld all honor . . .

One notices that at first Christ is seen to take on the attributes of mortal man, and then (eyes, larynx) of the active social person, or the artist. We keep in mind my earlier remarks on the poet's synaptic relationship between sight and voice.

We are then reminded that God was the perfect artist, the perfect sculptor who gave body to all the arts; and we need that reminding, for "we" said of his son or self: "His house is clay,/ how can he tell us of his far country?" Then when he showed some of his extraordinary art, dancing on water, for instance, or riming the original creation by healing with clay, "we" tried to make him give up his bohemian ways, finally allowing him to be fastened to the planks, where artists would show him for centuries, inspiration.

Gradually a strategy of the poem becomes clear, as we are led to know that the real denial of Christ is to place him in time, to hang him up like a finished portrait. We see exactly half way through the poem that the "we" includes people of "our time", including ourselves. The first hint is in the stanza concerning the crucifixion. "All legions massed," we are told. We come to learn that they are not only the Roman legions in biblical Palestine, that the masses include those held in our churches wherein people again and again face up to the figure on the cross, and that the "all" is the familiar Avison all.

But for another two stanzas we hear the past-tense story of denial going on.

When reports come that the "dead" Jesus had been *seen* alive, goes the tale, the eye witnesses had their *windpipes* closed. "Eyes, larynx" are punished, and the artist Jesus in men is presumably to be found dumb.

The poet then uses her grammar fully again, to tell us Where we are, at. In the last line of the sixth stanza and the first two lines of the seventh, we are quickly moved from "past perfect" tense, through "past imperfect," to "present". Jesus is seen searching and sounding in the human world, now. He tries to hear our music, and we make a din (*passim* dumbfounding), trying to deny art as we deny him, closing the flaps of our tents as we tried to close the larynxes of the tellers. "And dying", the poet adds (to rime with the other poem's "and failing"), in no way attaching the phrase to *either* the spoken-to Jesus or the spoken-for us.

"Yet you are," says the next line, and then "Yet you are/ constant and sure," as the old master painter God was said to be, offering grace, in Hopkins' "God's Grandeur". And in the following stanza Miss Avison uses her notation to present Christ as God, as the artist who continues to create, who begins his work over and over, the story never sealed in the Book. Hear how the ends of the lines tell us of God's continuous art, work:

Winning one, you again  
all ways would begin  
life: to make new  
flesh, to empower . . .

and how the accented words, after those pauses, *beginning* lines, tell us what the perfect "art objects" are. (Those readers who attend especially to Miss Avison's great usage of the word "all", and especially "all ways" in her religious verse, will be especially interested in the phrase "to make new". Ezra Pound took Confucius' advice, "make it new", to bring together the highest aspirations of art and social behaviour.)

In the last stanza, earlier referred to, Christ is said to (and asked to):

lead through the garden to  
trash, rubble, hill,

where the garden is Gethsemane, but also Eden, so that the rubble beyond it is Golgotha, but also this world, where the follower would be taken, back from the flight, to the grubby rooming house, to try all arts, not to sanctify them in a gallery, caught in unnecessary limitations. Christ, the "outcast's outcast", is

once again said to "sound", that which rimes, "dark's uttermost", which shines with the Avison metaphysic, as Hopkins' plummeting falcon shines, till in the final collapse of the ticking second, "time be full".

That would be the perfect artist's masterwork, to lay his hands on the most trashed of temporal stuff and immortalize it, the impossible dream of every less-than-perfect creator. Imitating such an accomplishment as well as she does here proves Margaret Avison a more-than-merely human artist.

But always with Christian humility and humanness. A model for the poet may be found in "Psalm 19" (applied to Jesus in the Christmas Liturgy). Therein, David the poet addresses The Chief Musician, asking that "the words of my mouth/ and the meditation of my heart/ be acceptable in thy sight." The psalm announces that all of earth, rubble as well as sky, will show God's "handywork". In her poem called "Ps. 19" (*TD*, 24), Miss Avison declares her desire to "love high" and says that that calls for a searching and sounding of all that is to be found inward "to the last ribcorner/ and capillary," and around one:

Yet to love high  
is with this very fear  
to shrink *and* seek to be made plain,  
openly to own  
both the mists smoking from pure  
stone-cold lake-still sun-sweetened places  
and the dank mist that rises  
from the long-unsunned, sour  
pools, hid even from the storm's sluices.

That is so far from honouring the artist — that any weekend gallery-goer may do. Look for his work and hers too, reader, on your way there, in the odd light that pulses from the unilluminated doorway where that pile of old clothes might contain the earth of a wretched man's body. There is no story there to which you can affix the words "The End" as you reach the end of the block.

# THE OCCASIONS OF IRVING LAYTON

*Mike Doyle*

FULL EXPOSURE to Irving Layton's work and character (through the work) is for me very recent. What is distinctive about Layton is his energy, sometimes zestful, sometimes fierce, and his thoroughgoing commitment to his own views of humankind and human experience. A confident egotist, he is yet "faced toward the stars"; believing in himself, he has had to struggle mightily for that belief — first against years of neglect, then against years of misunderstanding. Capable of generosity, tenderness, it is well-known that he has not survived without bitterness. He has written often of the spontaneity of his emotions, but has sustained himself by means of a pervasive Nietzscheanism, convinced that the battle is to the strong. The world of human happenings fascinates him. He may not love people much, or many of them, but he is not indifferent to them. His poems are populated. For most of his career his misanthropy is Swiftian, affection for individuals on the one hand (even though he is often harsh towards them), hatred of the mass and its abstractions on the other.

As is often pointed out, Layton is a traditionalist in technique. His career has coincided with the cult of "the new", but that is ultimately irrelevant. His own claim that he is a fine craftsman with a near-faultless sense of rhythm is not too extravagant, but (to use a phrase of Eli Mandel's) his early poems are a "pell-mell scattering of images". While many have moments of penetrating beauty — a quality achieved by image, intensity, tone — often they are not coherent wholes, being too clotted, over-detailed, combining clumsy syntax with an over-plus of material. Too much happens in too confined a space; but this is a squandering of riches, disclosing eagerness to proffer the largesse available to a true poet. Later, of course, he manages a range of traditional forms impressively, sometimes magnificently.



With fair frequency Layton is a *convincing* poet, "for real" as they say, but, despite the fact that his work is characteristically clear and clean-limned, there is something elusive about the exact nature of his talent. One critic has claimed that Layton is a didact, another that he is precisely not that. One sees him as a "performer", whose content is undemanding while his language is "daring" and "fresh". Another says he pays too little attention to rhythm and sound, that he is a rather boring purveyor of anecdotes, that he has no sense of the order of the universe. To some extent at least, it depends on where you start from!

Throughout his work there is much evidence that Layton can put on a style: pastiche of Auden, Eliot, Yeats, Williams, Stevens. Obviously, he is interested in all the means available to the poem. True, he has not explored much into the rhythm and sound of colloquial speech, for he is a literary poet, but he is not at all rhetorical in the bad sense, for he does have a good ear and, after the very early period, an ease of line which allows him to bring all his senses into his work with a high degree of naturalness. While one of his subsidiary notes is anti-cultural, anti-academic, he is steeped in European culture and he uses it to good purpose, just as he uses a wide range of the forms of English poetry — from song and ballad to sonnet and octosyllabic couplet, epigram, nursery rhyme, dramatic monologue.

Layton's undeniable anecdotage derives from his close interest in people, but the approach clearly demonstrates his typical relationship to them. A curiously pervasive effect in his work is of the poet at once committed and apart. Where he is a participant it is most commonly in sexual encounters, and even then one very often has the sense that he is clinically observing the woman, if not using her. In human encounter he can be involved to the point of anger or compassion, but apart nevertheless. He weeps to see an example of human decrepitude or the death of a bull-calf, but it is also he who, godlike in "The Mosquito" (26),\* notes his insect, his "Franciscan monk", "in the exact centre/ of the white writing table — a bullseye!", which he smashes with a fist and a "philosophical" observation. In other poems he is sickened by the aesthete who kills a frog by dropping a rock on it from above — for the effect (138), or by the "Neanderthal" (497) who, instead of simply swatting a fly, seals it off, condemning it to a slow death by insecticide. Highly characteristic anecdotes, these accounts of the slaughter of insects and small animals seem, in his consciousness, to represent a paradigm or analogy for man's fate, the fate of Job in the hands

\*Bracketed numbers are page references to *The Collected Poems of Irving Layton* (McClelland & Stewart, 1971), which is the occasion for this essay.

of a God for whom justice equals power. Paradoxically, man within his own sphere is dominant.

Elsewhere Layton reveals himself to be infected by the cynical aestheticism which repels him in another:

Whenever  
I see bugs manoeuvring  
on the kitchen floor  
with bits of food or paper  
sticking to their bodies  
  
I have a resistless desire  
to crush them  
under my foot  
  
Only if they have bright colours  
will I spare them (536)

Finding a sinkful of brown insects, he (the poem is in the third person, but we may assume that "he" is the poet) feels the insects to be "philistine matter":

His daily ontological lesson.  
Nothingness hell-bent for nowhere. Godlike he  
observes for a few moments this ridiculous parody  
on human existence, sponge in hand. No angel parts  
the ceiling to shout, "Hold!" And with one rough  
sweep he wipes away this living smear of fig-jam  
(including one or two artists and philosophers  
who have separated themselves from the frothing  
brown mass). (531)

The tone is, of course, ironical, but the particular posture occurs often enough in Layton's work for the irony to double back on itself. While man is the dominant creature in his world, the most sensitive and best of men need to isolate themselves to play their appointed roles. Such isolation has its dark side. Layton is as far as can be from a sense of possible community or from the attitudes of, say, a Schweitzer. As far as Layton is concerned, bill bissett's chant, "we are here to take care of the earth" is very likely the reverse of the truth, for he asks: "How to dominate reality? Love is one way;/ imagination another" (28). Rich and ranging as are his attempts at domination, they are ultimately piecemeal.

Layton appears to be a prime example of one ruled by his own "ego-system" (as Charles Olson might have put it) but what does this imply, and need we

assume that Layton's universe has no other ordering principle? It is well to keep in mind Leo Spitzer's dictum that any author should be criticized only after a full and detailed attempt has been made to understand his purposes. First, generally speaking Layton presents himself as a *personality* rather than as a *voice*, but this is not absolutely so, as is shown by a handful of his apocalyptic poems (even such an early piece as "Halos at Lac Marie Louise" — 33). The distinction in question is between man as part of the process, continuous in the whole of phenomenal reality (and therefore a voice of it) or man sensing himself as discontinuous, as a personality. Participation in reality or "How to dominate reality?" — the question is a crux.

P  
OET, COCKSMAN, TEACHER and misanthrope — these are the prominent facets of Layton's personality as presented through his writing. What does each role mean to him? Early he admitted to himself that "there isn't a ghost/ of a chance/ people will be changed by poems" (68), while somewhat later, writing of "Suzanne" (209), he acknowledges:

I owe to her  
beside simple thanks  
my notion of poetry  
as visceral sanity.

Poetry, then, is a condition of his own existence, something which happens to him ("I wait/ for the good lines/ to come" — 9), he receiving it as Sebastian received the arrows; but is it anything more? An attempted answer in "Whom I Write For" (78) conveys a markedly ambivalent sense of where Layton is as poet and human being. In summary, he suggests that he writes for all suffering humanity (including "Adolph Eichmann, compliant clerk"), famous or unknown, powerful or weak:

I do not write to improve your soul;  
or to make you feel better, or more humane;  
Nor do I write to give you any new emotions;

but rather

When reading me, I want you to feel  
as if I had ripped your skin off.

Why, he does not reveal, but the clearest impression is that he writes for others in order to feel and demonstrate his power over them. Yet he is at the mercy of that power, sometimes happily as in "At the Alhambra" (291), or disturbingly as in "Haruspex" (4), but always in danger of feeling "a seedless Joseph, castrate, storing grain" (64) or sensing himself one of a "congregation of sick egoists" (174). He is at the mercy of that power in another sense, remarking in his "Foreword" to this volume that "the poet is someone whom life knocks on the head and makes ring like a tuning fork". "Lies?/ No: Language", he answers his own question in "The Poetic Process" (156), but it is not usually language that he is tuning to.

Eli Mandel,<sup>1</sup> basing his view to some extent on the preface to *A Red Carpet for the Sun*, sees Layton's poetic personality as a fusion, as the double-god Dionysius/Apollo, a neat way of overcoming many apparently contradictory attitudes in Layton's work. Mandel's condensed exegesis is very convincing, but another remark in Layton's "Foreword" may be helpful here: "I see life as a Dionysian cock-and-cunt affair with time off, though precious little of it, for meditation and good works". Sometimes one lives, sometimes one stops to think about that and about other people's lives. The "good works", then, are in a context of:

One miserable human more or less hardly matters  
but the loss of a good poem does,  
being irreplaceable. (241)

Why are poems so important?

the poet transfigures  
Reality, but the traffic cop  
Transcribes it into his notebook. (156)

The poetic process is one of transmogrification. Behind these expressions (where they are not stock responses) is a Shelleyan sense of the poet's role. Yet William Carlos Williams (to take a one-time mentor and influence of Layton's) would have thought the cop's notes vastly more relevant and "real" and therefore the true stuff of "the poem".

Layton runs a whole gamut of attitudes about poetry, from the Shelleyan, to the Byronic (i.e., sardonic) (61), to a sense of the modern poet as eunuch (188, posed against a background of looking to earlier, Byronic models). The fundamental "doubleness" in Layton's attitude to poetry may be seen as a balance (thus, with great sympathy, Eli Mandel sees it), as tension, or as confusion. The

"trick of lying/ All poets pick up sooner or later" (316) can come perilously close to an illusion that one "transfigures/ Reality". In effect here Layton momentarily recommends attention to the cop's notebook, but he is immediately off in his crown of mist playing beggar-buffoon on the stilts which allow him to "see" at a higher level (and how appropriate the image is!) These flourishes seem necessary to his "freedom", to the kind of poet he is, to his sense of his poet-self. In a later poem, "The Skull", is a moment, a word, which synthesizes all:

I want to write poems  
as clean and dry  
and as impertinent  
as this skull

(491)

Observable everywhere in his poems, Layton has a gift (a very literary gift, let's accept it) for the word which is "fine excess". Here "impertinent" reverberates. The skull "grins", but it is also impertinent because in the end everything is as pertinent as anything, or nothing, part of the "poem/ that has written me since time began" (389). One has the feeling that his securest sense of poetry is when he is nearest to *voice*:

In me, nature's divided things —  
tree, mould on tree —  
have their fruition;  
I am their core. Let them swap,  
bandy, like a flame swerve  
I am their mouth; as a mouth I serve.

(121)

But the early image of "The Swimmer" (2), "Opening the spray corollas by his act of war", may be the nearest he has come to concentrating his various notions about the poet and his function. Immersing in "the cold green element" by an aggressive, functional plunge, the swimmer is at once transformed into something much closer akin to the water, "A brown weed with marvellous bulbs". He "goes under like a thief" as if headed for "home", but soon, "Stunned by the memory of lost gills", is forced to the surface again. *Almost* at one with the water element he is, simultaneously, participant, observer and self-absorbed. The poem speaks of integration at many levels, sexual, spiritual, and in poetry. Just so the poet, or Layton's deepest sense of the poet, plunging for his poem.

OF THE MANY OTHER ELEMENTS in Layton's work, predominant are: hatred of man's raging but all-too-rational cruelty in an apocalyptic universe, and an erotic sense of woman, a chief means of whatever solace he may achieve.

One of his most scarifying poems, "The Cage" (42) is a terrible vision of man's "altruism". Blinded "without charge" by the "selfless blacksmith", the poem's protagonist is kept in a cage made of iron and stone donated by masons and ironmongers. Each of these worthies competes in disinterested goodliness, clumsily colliding with his fellows in eagerness to attend the "Blinded and raging" prisoner. A similar view of the human universe is conveyed with still sharper irony in "The Improved Binoculars": city in flames, firemen first to save themselves, real estate men already gazing speculatively at the land being cleared by ruin, lovers deserting each other in mid-coition:

And the rest of the populace, their mouths  
distorted by an unusual gladness, bawled thanks  
to this comely and ravaging ally, asking

Only for more light with which to see  
their neighbour's destruction.

All this I saw through my improved binoculars. (139)

Both poems lay bare the demonic aspect of man, and Layton's Faustian view of the world is further strikingly evoked in "In the Midst of My Fever" (98), which absorbs an attitude from his Auden period ("large/ as Europe's pain" catches the tone here), going beyond it, to portray, in technicolor irony, a world in which it is miraculous that "someone/ quietly performed a good deed", in which cruelty is expected and the ways to freedom are labyrinthine and fugitive:

Nudes, nodes, nodules, became all one,  
existence seamless and I  
Crawling solitary upon the globe of marble  
waited for the footfall which never came.  
And I thought of Time's wretches and of some  
dear ones not yet dead  
And of Coleridge taking laudanum. (99)

This vision of human depravity, in a world "Like a backdrop held by an enormous claw" (142), is held in suspension in one of Layton's finest poems, "Seven O'Clock Lecture" (110). Speaking simultaneously of his roles as poet

and teacher, and of the "permanent bloom on all time-infected things", he sees the appalling contrast between spilt blood and the beauty of "the Arts", despairing of their being brought into any kind of life-giving balance in this world of well-aired sheets and "chromium gods" ("chromium" being his term for mindless contemporary barbarism, the abstractionism of modern life). He sees the poet as suffering clown ("God! God! Shall I jiggle my gored haunches/ to make these faces laugh?"), yet as controller, (teacher?) even inventor, of the scene; so that "the immortal claptrap of poetry" fits ambiguously into the whole ambiguity of man's "will to falsehood" among the "immortal coal of the universe".

Ambiguity is deepened by Layton's sense of an over-riding power, the "enormous claw" of a wrathful God (in an "atheist's" world!):

God, when you speak, out of your mouth  
drop the great hungry cities  
whose firetrucks menace my dreams (143)

Whatever coherence may be discerned in his view of human experience, it is through this nightmare of holocaust, of the apocalypse. With it goes a bitter sense of betrayal, for it is this same teeming God of whom the whale, in its joyous "being-at-oneness/ with the universe", thinks:

"Surely the Maker of Whales  
made me for a purpose".  
  
Just then the harpoon  
slammed into his side  
tearing a hole in it  
as wide as the sky. (470)

Layton is not a poet of the single vision, but a man of varied (often inconsistent) moods and passions, whose intensity is frequently a fusing power in his work. While here and there (especially in his portraits of women or responses to the plight of animals) are moments of tenderness and generosity, he is mostly an energetic hater. Perceiving that love is essential for survival, his own contribution to that end tends paradoxically to be negative and destructive. He detests mass-man and conformist hypocrisies, persistently attacking the abstract, the academic, the theoretical which drives out flesh-and-blood responses:

Frantic love of the Divine  
Burns out common affection:

So it was that Augustine  
Thinking concubinage sin  
Abandoned child and wife  
To essay the holy life (272)

or

The Leninists are marching on us.  
Their eyes are inflamed with social justice.  
Their mouths are contorted with the brotherhood of man.  
Their fists are heavy with universal love. (222)

He despises "the world's acquired acumen: / To sin privately and speak well of Good" (277). One of his greatest strengths is forthrightness or, at least, a willingness to admit his own positions and to realize without apology that they are partial. What does *he* mean by "Good", though? A good lay, an honest merchant, a dead Nazi or Arab? If, in one mood, his stance towards reality is Faulknerian-romantic (for Faulkner too professed to think a good poem worth the lives of any number of old ladies), so, in terms of human behaviour, Layton tends to be Hemingway-existentialist. An action is good if you "feel good" after it, and

All the motions of living are equally absurd  
But one might as well have clean linen. (25)

It depends on you, positively, being yourself, as opposed to "Homo Oeconomicus":

From everywhere comes up the stench  
Of technology's *massenmensch*,  
Not a man really, but a tool.  
Frightened, alienated, dull;  
A machine part, replaceable . . . (282)

None of this is new, it need not be, and it shows Layton very much as a man of his period. Tinged with sentimentalism, it can carry him as far as a curious inversion of the pathetic fallacy:

Philosophies  
religions:  
so many fearful excuses  
for not letting the sun



nourish one  
and burn him to a cinder

Look at the skeletons  
of those oaks:  
the proud flame of life  
passed through them  
without their once having heard  
of Jesus or Marx

(308)

Disgust with human beings leads him to despair that the end of our universe is still "more than a billion years away". Observing human depravity through his "improved binoculars" he adopts a tone of scathing irony, forgetting that in another mood a human fate seems to him akin to that of a roach drowned in a glass of wine. He sees "Everywhere,/ the stink of human evil", yet regards the average man as "a repressed nine-to-five slave," encountering whom in a restaurant,

I had a sudden vision  
of mashed potatoes.  
But these had their coats on.

(44)

Finding the so-called "good life" deplorable, yet he seems to feel that its material sleaziness is all there is, the "truth" (he advises the rabbi) being sensible investment in real estate by men "bored by whisky and wifeswapping" (49). Slave or not, man is predatory, but his predatoriness is without grace, freedom or self-enjoyment. Self-hating, "tamed and tainted" man sets traps for wild free natural creatures, but "even/ more terrible traps for his own kind" (67). Without lustre, man (Layton's elevator man) spends his life pointlessly "going up and down", fulminating against anyone who threatens his world with the least change. The poet says "almost aloud":

"Civilization could not endure  
A single hour without your trapped soul"

(70)

Layton loathes civilization, or professes to, but his rage here echoes curiously that of the "affable tool" he is addressing, and he himself is subject to "the insult of birth,/ the long adultery with illusion" (75). On the one hand are the "un-lived lives" of the ladies at Traymore's, on the other the repeated view that man is more venomous (evil) than a snake, a venom which takes the form of abstraction, alienation, dehumanization, lack of ability to empathize (theme of many

poems, such as "Life in the 20th Century" — 247). But what does human Mr. Layton say to all this?

Idiot!  
The one human I'd trust  
is a deaf-mute paraplegic —  
behind bars! (260)

The realm in which he feels at ease is one where he is conscious of the sun, of delicate flowers, of children, of grassy fields, of trees and "Waiting patiently for their gift of leaves" (326) "in this world of mournful beasts/ that are almost human" (455); but at the heart of this same nature-loving, peace-loving Layton is a Heraclitean restlessness, the rejector of "dreary Absurdist plays", craver for the "sweet smell of lechery, of steamy scrotum/ and crotch", one who is finally a lover of the abyss:

I'm tired of seeing the world go by on its well-oiled joints,  
of all this repetitive, ignoble, useless pother.  
It's the sameness that finally disappoints (426)

At the same time, as in "Epiphany" (459) he is disgusted by human sensation-seeking.

LIKE WHITMAN, Layton "contradicts" himself, but it may be questioned that the contradictions partake in a larger harmony. His personalism is no heresy, merely a limitation of range. He once wrote that a "poet is someone who has a strong sense of self", but his sense is of the occasions of his own ego. Without belittlement we may say that he is an occasional poet, one who stands as a critic of our society (from "this arsehole of a country" to the whole Western way of life), but whose criticisms are not especially fresh insights and not buttressed by an alternative vision or a suggestion for new ways of living. Apparently he sees himself as a being profoundly different from his fellow-citizens, as looking deeper than they, and suffering more, but it may be simply that he is a more articulate victim of the same psychological and moral confusions.

Erotic love would be a chief component of any Layton vision of utopia or paradise. In quest of "love" he bares his back to sun and moon, and one version of Layton the lover, going up and down like a bicycle pump (or an elevator man?), is comical, if sometimes savagely so. But many of the love poems are true celebrations, such as the early "Song for a Late Hour" (30), "For Musia's

Grandchildren" (455) and the tenderly beautiful and deservedly much-anthologized "Berry Picking" (345).

In some of his less likeable and more perfunctory erotic poems woman is viewed as if she were a side of meat; but often his eroticism is evinced with a respect and tenderness akin to love. Sometimes, too, he generates a feeling of human excitement in the occasion, conveying a sense of propinquity and mutual complicity (as in the epigrammatic sequence "Five Women" — 332). Women's Libbers must find Layton appalling and would certainly argue that he is chained by old-fashioned sexual attitudes. He is in that, as in so much else, a traditionalist.

It is sad to be an atheist,  
sadder yet to be one with a limp phallus (402)

he observes in "Mahogany Red", in one of many references to his supposed "atheism", which read mostly as if he means "relativism" or lack of ultimate purpose (compare "Côte Des Neiges Cemetery", "Gratitude", "Elegy for Strul", "One Last Try at a Final Solution", and many other poems). The limp phallus confirms the "atheism" as also does the lady's garish red hair. A genuine feeling for the woman, present in the poem, is overburdened by Layton's contemplation of *carpe diem*. Similarly, poems such as "The Way of the World", "Undine", "Dionysus" and "Diversion" (the tones of which suggest that he has also learnt from the Roman poets) have a curious, silvery air of detachment. Yet "A Strange Turn", also concerned with passing time and missed opportunity, an occasion on which the sexual roles are in a way reversed, comes through as fully and poignantly real:

Ah, if my flesh were but firm, not loose,  
And I were young, how she'd ride and ride! (190)

Another poem, nearly as moving, in which the woman is dominant, is "For My Green Old Age" (297). In both pieces, behind the poignancy, held in balance with it and thus allowing the poem to reverberate, is Layton's other sense of woman, as man-devourer, emasculator, of whom a full-scale portrait is given in "Woman in the Square" (144). Yet another poem on time and sexual love, "Dans Le Jardin" (216), in which the lovers together are "uncoupled by the coming night" contains its sensuality in a cool formalism which orders great depths of feeling. Where these poems work it is because of the sense of emotion recollected, of a measuring of experience, a somewhat different manifestation of which is the fusion of feeling and calculation in "The Seduction" (288).

Among the later poems we range from the Yeatsian "I pray my last days on earth be mad/ with sexual desire" (530), to the deepening pessimism of the image of time as a wolf who claws to death the lover's lady (576), and the bitter declaration that "women are repulsive mammals/ without souls" (518), whereas earlier they had been imagined as "the waters where ends all sin" (351). Towards woman as towards all experience Layton displays the full spectrum of attitudes. His devourers, they are also his earthly salve; all beneficence, yet they are soulless. Desirable beyond measure, they are to be cast off contemptuously after use. Truly Protean (as George Woodcock observed), has Layton integrated the many elements of himself, as poet and man? Rather than unacknowledged law-giver, he is the poet in search of his wholeness; but his sense of selfhood seems to be of a reactive self, contingent upon circumstance.

Nowadays we are largely indifferent to our poets, and those few of us who are not tend to demand that, to expect serious attention, a poet must offer us a new-imagined world, fruit of a large vision and a large commitment. At the very least we look for a distinctive voice, a "determining personality". In these terms, Layton cannot be said to have a large vision, for his poems are the occasions of a somewhat chameleon personality, which has obvious enough limitations. No single work of his is on a large or profound scale; but what of his commitment? Obviously, his life has been devoted to poetry, and in no small way. His efforts and his personality have broken through thick barriers of social convention and inhibition. Both his work and his belief in it have been salutary in establishing and developing the poetry of his own country, and to that poetry he has contributed a fair number of beautifully made, memorable poems. A prose volume would be a useful companion to the poems, for the various lively prefaces to Layton's books are themselves an important document in Canadian poetry.

Many facets of his work have not been dealt with here: his poems about, and to, other poets; his Jewishness, and the way it has developed since the six-day war and his extensive travels in Europe; his feelings about the "sunless Presbyterians" of Canada and the fact (usually overlooked) that Europe doesn't come off any better; influences on him of other writers and thinkers, particularly the often-noticed influence of Nietzsche; his use of symbols (by no means systematic, but nonetheless present); his many moving animal poems (written about perceptively by a number of critics); his liking for a mandarin use of language; his wit and his skill at epigram (and his misfires at it); his religious sense — personal and anti-institutional; his exploitation, or perhaps exploration, of surrealism; the specific successes of his wide-ranging employment of traditional

forms, and inventiveness in both pastiche and parody; his use of myth and classical allusion; the sensitive lyricism of his recollections of boyhood; his penetrating satire and pervasive irony, and the increasingly overt political poetry of his later period; his feeling of the inertia of our society, and its protective device of rationality; his elegies, which include some of the most moving moments in his whole *oeuvre*. No attempt has been made to comment on his "best" poems separately and as such, but these would include "Boys Bathing", "Halos at Lac Marie Louise", "For Aviva, Because I Love Her", "The Predator", "Seven O'clock Lecture", "The Cold Green Element", and probably a dozen others.

That solid paragraph listing what I have not dealt with, suggests that I could have written a completely different essay on Layton's work and, oddly enough, I expected to. I would like not to have been so negatively critical, for he is the kind of poet for whom one has a great deal of sympathy and fellow-feeling. My list of omissions suggests a richness I have not captured, in both man and poet. Confident as he is, this is not to say he is never daunted by Nobodaddy or the grave. Perhaps the most engaging thing about him is that he will come right back and cock a snook (or snook a cock!) at both. He is a man for whom poetry has been the manner (and maybe it is all in the manner) of his living. Wakening into the poem, as in "Early Morning in Cote St. Luc", his senses are immediately engaged by "the white/ table under the willow tree/ a fragment of edge" (as in a Vlaminck painting), by the mantis, the professor ("his collection/ of tomes, slowly yellowing/ into favour"), by the sweetly-dreaming children, but finally by the question of his own place in the scheme of things, and a place for those like him:

How to make room  
in my mind for these  
and the black bitter men —  
my kin —  
the inconsolable, the far-seeing? (109)

For all his misanthropy and inconsolableness, his characteristic posture is, as he said of the idealized Roman woman, "kicking . . . epitaphs out of the way" (375), though with his features increasingly a darkened frown.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Eli Mandel. *Irving Layton*. (Toronto: Forum House).

## THE BRIGHT NEW DAY

Donald Stephens

AUSTIN CLARKE, *When He Was Free and Young and He Used To Wear Silks*, Anansi, \$2.75 paper.

HUGH GARNER, *Violation Of The Virgins*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, \$7.95.

HUGH HOOD, *The Fruit Man, The Meat Man And The Manager*, Oberon, \$2.95 paper.

NORMAN LEVINE, *I Don't Want To Know Anyone Too Well*, Macmillan, \$6.95.

*Fourteen Stories High: Best Canadian Stories of 1971*, edited by David Helwig and Tom Marshall. Oberon, \$2.95 paper.

*Stories From Western Canada*, edited by Rudy Wiebe, Macmillan.

IN APRIL'S *Maclean's*, Donald Cameron says that "hardly anyone publishes Canadian stories these days", though the above list—and there are other books not included—would tend to refute his assertion. He does go on to say that the short story form is the one in which Canadian fiction first achieved "international quality". If he means "reputation" rather than "quality"—what is "international quality" any way?—then he is very right. The Canadian short story did, through writers like Wilson, Callaghan, and Gallant, achieve for Canadian literature an international reputation, before very many of our poets and novelists became known abroad. Quite recently in Canada wonderful things have been happening to the short story to secure even a stronger position for the form on the international scene. Not only are the stories widely read, but also criticism of them is receiving an important position, as can be witnessed by

the recent issue of *World Literature Written in English* (Group 12, M.L.A., April, 1972) which is devoted entirely to short fiction in Canada.

The least successful of these recent collections is Austin Clarke's *When He Was Free and Young and He Used to Wear Silks*, the ponderousness of the title, unhappily, being reflected in some of the stories. The plots are weak and tenuous; the characters are often one-dimensional, the settings too stereotyped. The fluidity of the genre permits a writer to overcome obstacles to completeness of characterization and subtlety of plot that arise from the brevity of the short story; Clarke, however, seems to meander more than construct so that his stories lack depth. But occasionally, when he increases the complexity of the problems facing his characters, they, too, become multi-layered, and special moments that dissolve into one another heighten his achievement. Clarke is a writer to watch,

for the book gives signs of genuine, if only incipient, craftsmanship; he often writes extremely well, revealing a fine sense of language and nuance, but his work contains a fault that can be seen in Margaret Atwood's early work, where the consciousness of the craft outweighs the art; Atwood has not overcome this problem because of her didactic stance, but I hope that Clarke can do so in his next book.

Hugh Garner has a special facility at writing in the 'twenties tradition that first brought Canada international recognition for its literary pursuits. There is something very hard, almost brittle, about Garner's approach to the underprivileged in his *Violation of the Virgins*, tempered when he examines those who have been humiliated because of their unfortunate state. Drawing on a past that hints at a long and varied experience, Garner, supported by his astringent style, slips back in time easily, with a sense of shifting mood which makes his collection of short stories seem very much shorter than it is. Garner is easy to read, mainly because enough happens to advance the action but never so much as to induce tedium — often a problem in short story collections by his contemporaries.

Readers of Canadian short fiction will be delighted with the new work of Hugh Hood, *The Fruit Man*, *The Meat Man* and *The Manager*. Awakening to realities other than one's own is Hood's focus, the core beneath the book's surface. Hood is too cool a hand (or so it seems to me, who have never met him), and has too much special knowledge about people to impart, to become the controlling consciousness in his work. Events and characters evolve outside his range, while he preserves a rewarding detachment. His

stylistic experiments are well done, particularly in "Who's Paying for This Call", the last story in the collection. Hood continues to grow, to reflect his time, in his technique and in his themes; he knows the space he is in.

But it is Norman Levine who especially seems to know who he is and the stage he has reached; he has caught the measure of his time with great subtlety. Because some of the stories in *I Don't Want To Know Anyone Too Well* are reprints of *One Way Ticket*, published in 1961, some readers may feel that Levine has stopped growing as an artist. It seems to me rather, that the combination of new stories and old produces a blend of attitudes to life that captures more successfully than anything else the fragmented quality of our time, and its yearning for a not-too-distant past. The camp of this decade, to which Art reverts, has been the 'thirties; Levine, however, goes back to the 'forties, and tells stories of his experiences during the war; the same people emerge in his vision as are present in his earlier books, but they are more firmly drawn, more carefully recreated. Levine follows Voltaire's dictum that some people of today who have passed the age of forty use to express their feelings: "Nostalgia isn't what it used to be." It is Levine's use of the past that makes him a fully contemporary voice.

The range of subject matter and the variety of technical experimentation present in contemporary, and often younger, writers are best displayed by *Fourteen Stories High: Best Canadian Stories of 1971*, edited by David Helwig and Tom Marshall. Alden Nowlan proves here that he is as good a short story writer as he is a poet, something his critics have been wondering about for some time. Realism

is still the penchant of the Canadian short story writer, but mixed with it is some interesting fantasy, and humour, and some rearrangement and new use of Indian legend. The editors should be commended, not only for their choice of some very good stories, but also for giving the public a very keen sense of the short story in Canada in 1971; altogether a most useful book.

Different in concept, but giving a most admirable range, is *Stories From Western Canada*, selected by Rudy Wiebe, himself a masterly short story writer. Wiebe has selected his stories from a wide time span and has grouped them under thematic headings: "Such People" dealing with a variety of human beings; "Land", describing the landscape and its meaning to those who work on it; "Dream and Live", about those who work and dream, and wait; "Strange Love", a section which captures the compelling mood that the prairie exerts upon its inhabitants; and "Families", a section that more than any other fulfils Wiebe's intention, "To provide the varieties of pleasure that

stories still give those who care to listen". One story particularly is outstanding: Margaret Laurence's "Horses of the Night".

The reader who wants to find out what is happening to short fiction in Canada is fortunate to have these two anthologies available. Where the latter presents a broad range in time, not for historical coverage but as an ideal way to show the story's growth in Western Canada, the former carefully brings us up to date about what happened last year, a year of experimenting in form and reasserting elemental human values. The short story in Canada best portrays the Canadian urge toward a satisfying creative life that can embrace the limitless sensibilities of average people who trust the human spirit, who steer away particularly from revenge as a guiding principle in life. As Alec Lucas has recently said: "Anthologies in their bright new day . . . now play a bigger part in fostering humanistic values and imaginative living." And that, after all, is what Canadian literature — all literature — is about.

## THE WOMAN OF BARRIE

*Al Purdy*

GEORGE BOWERING, *Touch: Selected Poems 1960-1970*. McClelland & Stewart, \$4.95.

BILL BISSETT, *Nobody Owns th Earth*. Anansi, \$2.50.

DOUG FETHERLING, *Our Man in Utopia*. Macmillan, \$6.50.

BILL HOWELL, *The Red Fox*. McClelland & Stewart, \$4.95.

FOUR BOOKS OF POEMS. The only connection I can see between them is a remark by George Bowering in the Intro to his *Selected Poems* about reading poems aloud. "A woman in Barrie told me that she didn't like my poetry before

she came to my reading and then she liked it — that was because she hadn't really read it, not all of what she had." And I wonder how many more "Women of Barrie" there are, who need to hear a writer aloud before they think he is good?



Bill Bissett also reads before audiences a great deal; Bill Howell does sometimes; I've never heard Doug Fetherling read at all. And interjecting myself into the discussion: I read at universities too, and can remember the "Woman of Barrie" saying much the same thing to me. Well, I've always felt that one of these people's senses was badly impaired, because I read poems on the page and hear their sound simultaneously in my head. However, it's apparent that some people do not, and these must depend on the performing poet declaiming from the platform. But despite the number of poets doing this, most people will only read verse from the printed page. Which I've always thought was a good thing.

Why? Because many fine poets are lousy readers of their own work. But a bad poet may be partly redeemed by having an excellent voice, with a dramatic personality adding things to his poems that are not really there at all. In fact I've seen people nearly hypnotized by some of the worst poetry ever written, simply because the reader was a cross between Alec Guinness and Dylan Thomas. I'm inclined to think most people listened to Thomas principally for his ocean-tidal-melodious voice, only secondarily for his poems.

The above is prelude to saying that Bill Bissett is probably the premier "performer-reader" in the country. A record I have of his, called "Awake in the Red Desert", is the most caterwauling cacophonous vowel-crazy collection of dissonance I've ever experienced. Therefore, look at Bissett's poems on the page. Notice the almost endless repetitions of line and phrase, the more or less phonetic spelling, the childlike obviousness of many

things he says. In short, they are verbal spells and incantations.

Bissett is a poet-prophet, or at least believes he is. Legalized marijuana, universal love, and the undeniable fact that "nobody owns the earth" are three of Bissett's urgent requirements for Utopia or Heaven on Earth. And the very naiveté of his language and themes, the earnestness and complete personal belief he brings to poems — these make him oddly touching and, I think, worthwhile. Bissett's screaming crying moaning caterwauling on lecture platforms I dismiss — and isn't that condescending of me? Of course, but isn't discrimination, selectivity, catholicism (what you like) integral in all of us, whether in the choice of beer or friends?

But there is a core of integrity about poet-prophet-bissett one can't ignore. The reasons why one can't ignore him would be difficult to explain to (say) a panel of fifty middle-aged English profs never entirely weaned from Chaucer, Eliot and alcohol. In many ways, and in my own way, I agree with the things Bissett says in his poems and life. Universal love is the best contraceptive I can think of. It's also agreeable to me that nobody should own the earth, or even 65 per cent of Canadian industry. But Bissett isn't trying to convince me, just the world.

I have a strong feeling that Doug Fetherling may soon be a very good poet — if he doesn't lose the neuroses forced out into poems — instead of lapsing into agonized moans. That seems melodramatic, but is the reverse side of many calm and urbane love poems. The book's dust jacket shows "Our Man" about to preach a sermon at the church in Utopia (I presume there is a Utopia, Ont., and Fetherling couldn't resist the opportu-

nity), peering coyly insecure from the church door.

But Fetherling is not *my* man nor, apparently, that girl's to whom he addresses a suitable suite of poems. These involve descriptions of physical feelings and the hard circumstances of being in love — hotel rooms, beds, the female body, and being left in the lurch in Utopia. But the actual doomed-glorified feeling of being in love and hence immortally miserable doesn't come across, except once:

Your absence has not taught me  
how to be alone, it merely has  
shown that when together we cast  
a single shadow on this wall.  
The wall I suppose is as a wall  
should be: plain and bare and  
final as a cliff. And when I  
stretch, my hands find it instead  
of you and I invent truths men  
thought of years ago without  
telling me.

Much of Fetherling's work is written in a deliberate analytical-cum-vivisectionist method and tone of voice. (Incidentally, a complete change of style from his first book.) And perhaps this method increases the cold heat when such a genuine poem as "Your Absence" is discovered. And others are almost as good. But many of his poems repel me as device, rather than whatever a poem actually is. For instance, one mentioning "the effect (after the poet's suicide) his brains are to have upon the wallpaper design." (Who cares, except him?) Others are blank cartridges of the imagination.

However these adverse comments should prevent no one from reading *Utopia*. Poets may arrive like a world's possible ending: "not with a bang but a whimper". Fetherling's whimper holds a certain grandeur.

Bill Howell is 25, with many of the

faults and virtues some poets have at that age. For instance, I'm sure Howell would defend "I can't wait to get home for Christmas and be hugged by Mom," which sentiments cause me to wriggle with extreme nausea. But then, "After Reading Camus" ends:

For the record I'll tell you how  
I'm going to end:  
I'm ninety-seven  
in my Ferrari on an Alpine roadway (or  
equivalents)  
when I miss a hairpin  
turn with my sixth or seventh wife (or  
equivalents)  
when a ball of living fire  
crowns my charisma.

At which point I chuckle, thinking he has a "good idea" for a poem there. Howell has a lot of good ideas, and sometimes he makes use of them. Sometimes.

Ten years ago, when Bowering, Frank Davey, Frederic Wah and others were schoolboys of the Vancouver Group — these being embryonic Black Mountain adults — I noticed phrases and passages in Bowering which I thought indicated a developing poet in his early stages. It's a pleasure to see that development carried much farther in his *selected poems*, and become solid achievement. But I retain the same reservations I've always had (somewhat differing from his own reservations about me) re Bowering's methods and loyalties to the in-group whose far-out gods are still Olson, Williams and Creeley. However, it's rather picayune to mention such ideologies in the face of Bowering's undeniable merit. I don't really give a damn how he manages to write his poems, although I'm sure he'll tell me if I don't ask. The best way to illustrate this merit is to quote a poem in full.

POEM WRITTEN FOR GEORGE

Poetry with politics in it  
is small men answering back to volcanoes.

Volcanoes are upside down grails  
knights look for  
walking on their hands.

I never met a poet yet  
who was a knight.

Knights are ignorant men with strong arms.

I never met a soldier yet  
who was a poet.

Poets don't look for grails.

They want to drink from  
the cups at hand.

Sometimes they climb mountains  
to look down the middle  
where mangled kings lie in a heap.

But come to think of it, I've met one  
Black Mountain climber who was a poet.  
For my money, Bowering has not written  
a better poem than that — straightforward,  
clear, no waste wordage, and with implications  
for undeparted captains and kings. The poem  
also says: how wonderful to write poems! Or does  
it say: how wonderful to be a poet? I hope the first.

Bowering's methods are fairly easy to analyze —  
unless you're the Woman of Barrie. He uses good  
grammatical English, rarely any slang or throwaway  
lines. In fact this correct English seems to me  
*too* correct at times, not quite real or natural as  
Bowering believes speech should be; and he gives his  
poems a deadpan seriousness, broken only occasionally,  
as in a poem called "Cold Spell" (not included here).  
And given that word-picture, one might think of  
him as an Eliotish sort of bloke, feeding cats and  
watering roses in his old age.

Despite writing poems like "Baseball", Bowering's  
colloquialisms occasionally seem contrived to me.  
"Lugging" means

carrying, and "rooting" means cheering, which is about  
as close as he comes. If anything he tends to understatement,  
as in:

THE SILENCE

The silence  
that some days  
brings itself between us

fools my heart,  
it thinks there is  
a loud constant noise.

But method apart, I call that a little masterpiece.

Well, having praised Bowering so highly (and I have), another side of him should be mentioned: triviality (again occasionally). I think it's trivial to write an eleven-page poem about baseball (and life too, of course): unless the poem isn't trivial. Bowering can immediately retort that I myself wrote a poem about hockey

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players, and he may very possibly judge *that* to be trivial. Obviously, a good poem can be written about anything, including the politics he says is "small men answering back to volcanoes."

But a good poem about baseball seems to me very difficult to write, perhaps because of the superficial nature of the game. Superficial because such games are the froth and entertainment of daily life, and because one game is really interchangeable for another. And there are dozens of others, including chess and parcheesi. The integral things of life are, life, death and sex (which last includes love among its other implications), and possibly taxes. Therefore, even a good baseball poem is bound to be trivial froth — unless its umbilical cord connects with something much more important. (To digress: Bernard Malamud wrote the only good novel I know of about baseball: "The Natural" — which is nevertheless a badly flawed novel.)

Bowering has three other long poems in his *Selected*: "Windigo", which is descriptive with symbolism engrafted: "Hamatsa", about Kwakiutl Indian "cannibal" societies, with its repeated delightful use of "the poet among us"; and "Touch", philosophic, trying to enclose all Bowering thinks and feels about — about everything, I suppose. All of these,

while entertaining in part, are never wholly successful. Other long poems Bowering has omitted; and I think that's just as well. I make the dangerous judgment here that he is most effective in comparatively short pieces, which by his "natural" method and prosody he might think alien to him.

Employing throwaway lines and phrases for their "natural" effect as a break, as a voice-chuckle in a written tone of voice, supplies the human verbal quality cold print ordinarily prohibits. Speech is extempore, a quality that poetry seldom possesses — but should try to possess, at least sometimes. Bowering's continual lack of such ingredients sometimes give his poems a rhetoric and solemnity I am sure he would deny having, even a faintly Biblical sound for me. This being an ingredient of his "method," which he might also deny having. But to make an end: I think Bowering is an "important" poet who should be read — even listened to as he demands. (Even the disagreements I have with him do not seem dead ends for me, but reasons to re-examine my own reasons for writing as I do.) He has written some half-dozen quite marvellous poems in this book — which seems to me a very high lifetime batting average. And I join with the Woman of Barrie in my own kind of homage.

## POET AND PERSON

*William H. New*

GEORGE BOWERING, *Al Purdy*. Copp Clark, \$2.15.

ERNEST REDEKOP, *Margaret Avison*. Copp Clark, \$2.15.

TWO OF THE LATEST in Copp Clark's biocritical *Studies in Canadian Literature* maintain that series' high stan-

dard and personal approach. The "personality" of each book, in fact, is what makes George Bowering's *Al Purdy* and

Ernest Redekop's *Margaret Avison* such distinctive pieces of criticism. Each writer — compelled perhaps by his own obvious enthusiasm for his subject — has found himself caught up in the tonal milieux and technical responses of the poet he writes about. Thus Redekop is formal and intellectually allusive, while Bowering is laconic and gregariously engaging. To read the two books together is to take a lesson in the breadth of critical method. But it is also to be directed towards some of the central concerns of modern Canadian poetry.

When I say "formal" I do not mean Redekop is aloof; his criticism not only expresses the individual engagement with images and ideas that Avison's poetry encourages, but also exactly parallels the relationship that Avison herself probes with the world she perceives. The "optic heart" venturing into the world in her poetry epitomizes her own rigorous intellectual battle to understand the nature of reality, and the manner of apprehending it, and the difficulty of knowing whether one has found reality or merely another layer of appearance. The optic heart venturing into the world of her poetry, comparably, must grapple with these same ideas in order to experience with the author the real emotional satisfaction she finds in the mind's insight, in the sudden illuminating cross between rational reflection and precise observation.

As Redekop observes, perceiving and perceiver blend together in Avison's cryptic style, but then he goes on with admirable lucidity to decipher puzzles, explicate dense passages, link images to images and poems to poems in order to suggest a thematic unity (by no means the only one possible in such complex poetry) and

a course of intellectual progress. From examining the poems about the nature of perception, he moves to consider the interaction between perceiver/vision and metaphysical obscurity. The next stage returns to the physical world only to pose its metaphoric identity with an interior landscape:

At every point, landscape, like an optical illusion, flips from outside to inside and back; perspectives shift rapidly, and the mind of the reader is stretched and turned inside out.

As her reality becomes increasingly spiritual, the word and the Word conjoin; in an explicitly Christian discovery she locates a Person in whom creative power and manifest identity are one, and *knowing*, now, she can affirm a language that does not lock itself in historical, concrete event, but rather flowers into transfiguring truth.

Her provocative juxtaposition of images and her deliberately spare but allusive and assonantal style help to substantiate the judgment that George Bowering in the midst of his study of Purdy pronounces on her work:

Purdy's rhymes . . . were beginning to reflect that [postwar] change — they were not now so forced nor so attentive to the hapless notion of 'full' rhyme, though they were not so liberated as those of Dudek and Souster, or the person who was emerging as our best chance to attain excellence on the international scene, Margaret Avison.

The implications of such an assessment are significant, for if Redekop never really directly says what is good about Avison's work, nor does Bowering about Purdy. Bowering says a lot about what is bad — largely the early, imitative, unrelaxed work — but what ultimately appears most *attractive* is the personality of Purdy himself. Redekop offered an intense explica-

tion of method and meaning, attempting a "kind of lighting up of the terrain / That leaves aside the whole terrain really", but "signalizes and compels, an advance in it." Bowering offers the Purdy Story — the working poet's journey from obscure romanticizing to nationally recognized ironic iconoclasm, from private winery to public anthology, from Roblin Lake to the extremities of Canada. Indeed, while Avison's concern for "civility" at large scarcely takes her geographically further than the Toronto lakefront, Purdy has consciously attempted to define the boundaries of Canadianism, locating identity not in the Person of the Word but (by no means ungodlessly) in the personal lives of ordinary countrymen — cowboys, CNR porters, Eskimo fishermen, union bargainers — whose characteristic stances and uncompromisingly colloquial voices he has increasingly tried to echo.

Yet both poets accept their immediate world as Heraclitean. Thus Bowering observes Purdy suggesting

that old-fashioned accumulative western cosmology should at least be replaced by first-hand "transcendental" observations:

"For multiple identity confuses anyway,  
there must be a single total,  
allwater — torrents of god-stuff."

"God-stuff" is a word made from the natural attempt to suggest the nameless holiness of the basic *fluid*, without trying hopelessly to tie something so manifestly changeable to a mind-chosen figure from traditions of history or myth. . . . But then in parentheses Purdy comments on the "absurd delight" in such intellectual speculation, deriding himself as always, but also warning the reader about the mind's playing a "shell game". Never let the self become pretentious, even in discovery. . . .

Purdy . . . realizes that no matter how hard the mind strives for permanence, everything is moving and changing, and "the form is HERE".

Purdy's "HERE", like Avison's "NOW", proves a takeoff point for transcendental celebration. The temporal proving more abstract, less immediately accessible, than the geomorphological, Avison at first appears the less "realistic" of the two. Place, at least, *seems* familiar. Rooted in language, however — and in Purdy's case in the tension between contemporary speech and conscious Classical Learning — both poets are bound by their poetry as much as freed by it, constrained by their role as mouthpiece of the moving spirit — medium, eye — into identifying with their landscape. Moreover, because that landscape is speech as much as position, their identity lies in sound as much as in sight. Avison's metaphysically serious punning of word/Word announces her open acceptance of the fact, her acknowledgment of language as object and subject, method and matter, in her response to living. Purdy's commitment to the abstract power of poetry, equally strong, is often masked by his ironic self-deprecation, his satiric put-downs, his direct social attacks and defences, which possess the subtlety of stumps and sometimes simply the easy flippancy of crackerbarrel wisdom. In aural intricacy, however, he reveals another voice in his work, a concern for voice itself, for the quality and power of utterance and for the individual manifestations of life that perceptive utterance affirms. Insistently, there is a centre. Affirmation and celebration — those traditional poetic tasks — thus lie at the core of their literary/spiritual/intellectual/vital experience. To probe towards that centre without insensitively excoriating the fragments of the whole is the critical task that their poetry has demanded, invited, and won.

# EXPATRIATE VARIATIONS

*Russell M. Brown*

LEO SIMPSON, *Arkwright*. Macmillan. \$9.95.

ALEXANDER KNOX, *Night of the White Bear*. Macmillan. \$6.95.

KELLY GOVIN, *Many Broken Hammers*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside. \$8.75.

ON THE SURFACE these three books are as diverse in setting and subject matter as conceivably possible, but at heart each deals with the same topic: social change and its effect on the individual. Significant to their choice of topic, the authors share one common experience, that of expatriation. Simpson is an Irishman who came to Canada in 1962; Knox grew up in northern Canada but now spends most of his time abroad working as a film actor; Govin has lived here fifteen years but spent the first part of his life in the Southwestern and Western U.S. Potentially this provides them with an outsider's objectivity about their theme, the ability to consider and evaluate which is never really available to the individual who remains in the midst of things. Two of these books do attain this kind of distance from their material and are powerful novels in consequence. The third, *Many Broken Hammers*, never finds the perspective it needs and as a result remains as lifeless as last week's news — or, worse yet, as unintentionally amusing as the TV rerun of a World War II movie full of undigested platitudes about freedom, democracy, and the American way.

In fact, Govin's problems in dealing with his material stem in part from his failure to distinguish literature which has a moral purpose from propaganda. Set in an "imaginary" Southwestern state (and

the coyness with which Govin refuses to give specific geographical location to what is clearly meant to be Texas is typical of the way he handles all of his subject matter, undercutting thereby much of the potential impact of such highly topical material), the novel deals with a confrontation between government forces and a group of radical-activist "Spanish-Americans" (Govin seems not to know that "Chicanos" is the more contemporary term). Its approach calls to mind the weaknesses of recent Hollywood attempts to exploit youthful interest in dissent — suggesting perhaps that the author has not entirely moved beyond his sometime occupation as film writer. The characters, studies in blacks, whites, and carefully modulated greys, are made to move through a series of events contrived to produce a feeling of inevitability about the tragedy to come. The novel all but provides its own parody when its central character stops to reflect:

Everybody's gone mad, choosing up sides, like players on a baseball field, or white and black hats in a Western movie. Stereotypes, heroes and villains and comic relief, and on the sidelines, grumbling and carping philosophers . . .

*Many Broken Hammers* has all of this, not the least of which are its "philosophers", an occupation pursued by each of the characters in his turn, as well as by an excessively intrusive author:

Even a casual study of history and literature establishes categorically that human beings are all subject to an enduring and omnipresent affinity, an unbreakable chain that links men, one to the other, an indestructible umbilical cord that connects action to reaction, cause to effect. Yet in spite of the pervasive and unprecedented diffusion of such literature, there are men who live all the days of their lives without the slightest knowledge of this causality.

There is an adolescent quality to this writing, as to most in the book.

When the novel finally reaches its conclusion, with scores of bodies littering the landscape in a scene which tries unsuccessfully to evoke a sense of outrage like that one feels about Kent State, few readers will retain the endurance to continue to care about what was, after all, an interesting enough plot-line. And when the novel's hero walks among the bodies of the fallen, providing appropriately sentimental eulogies for each, we are indeed not far from the sensibilities that created or applauded those World War II movies. The only difference — that in one case it is propaganda in service of the establishment, in the other, in opposition to it — is not ultimately important.

Simpson is at least as concerned with man's contemporary condition; he is no less a moralist and no less willing to utilize the didactic possibilities of literature. But though *Arkwright* at times comes perilously close to being toppled by its heavy load of anti-pollution preachments, Simpson — like the aesthetic juggler that he is — has the knack of putting yet another ball into the air at just the right moment, distracting the reader and allowing both reader and novelist to maintain the pretense that all this is, after all, only entertainment.

*Arkwright* reflects the Canadian novelist's fondness for the use of myth to pro-

vide structural coherence, though the relevance of the Noah myth suggested by the title is not at first apparent. The book ostensibly focuses not on the destruction of a civilization that allows another to be born, but rather on the need for an analogous death and rebirth in one man, a drunken, brawling, wenching, social misfit who is in fact reborn as early as page 10 of the novel, in a passage which accurately reflects Simpson's tight control of a sometimes broadly comic style:

My last careless deed completed, therefore. The brash Corsair fittingly becomes the scene of change, and sees the sudden death of that overaged adolescent Addison Arkwright. The man who now rises, gravely dignified, to visit the washroom, is no undisciplined romper. He stumbles, true enough, but he can't, can he, be blamed for the intemperate drinking of somebody else, a distasteful stranger recently deceased.

This rebirth is followed by an almost immediate relapse — and the thematic pattern of the novel is established, man struggling to free himself from the weight of the old Adam and finding himself unequal to the task.

Against its hero's search for rebirth the book juxtaposes a vision of a fallen society based on a distorted system of values. Simpson elaborates his mythic world by moving freely into the realm of fantasy in order to create modern parables about the capitalistic technocracy gone awry: a TV station which achieves record ratings while attempting to alienate all segments of its audience; a computer leasing firm whose thinking machines contain real people, the employees they are intended to replace; a company whose only product is not only pollution, but pollution at great profit. Simpson handles this parabolic method well, creating at times nightmare visions of the modern dehu-



manization of man that can be compared only to the factory scenes in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The recognition that this kind of fantasy and mythicizing is the surest and most telling way of dealing with a disturbing reality is contained in one of Addison's own musings:

The silence of gods always poses plain and fancy riddles, and the literature of interpretation is, I feel, most interesting where unaccommodating facts, which inhibit theory, are kept to a minimum.

Addison moves through this unreal world in his search for lost innocence as observer, chronicler, and occasional participant. The novel's focus shifts frequently, from Addison's relationship with his uncle, the arch-capitalist Casper Arkwright, through his discovery of a religion based on an ethic of failure, Elm-treeism, to the story of his friend Master McGrath, a quasi-saint of a man whose mission in life is to teach people how to block out the unpleasantness of TV commercials. Sometimes the book seems threatened by the very quantity of material with which it deals, by its deliberate lack of a single focus, and by the way it takes all the problems of contemporary society as its theme, but Simpson manages to hold his several strands together, and to provide enough rewards for the reader in the form of narrative (in what is never truly a narrative novel), wit, and fine writing to keep one threading his way through the labyrinthine complexity of Addison's world vision.

At times one may become frustrated with Addison as hero, for initially he seems to belong to that multitude of anti-heroes we have seen so often of late, men who can do nothing but turn potential success into failure in careers of destruction, inflicting pain on those around them.

Simpson, however, modifies this pattern significantly, first by allowing Addison some final measure of the redemption he so unendingly strives for, and, secondly, by suggesting that success and failure are shifty terms in a world where the most successful businessman may also be doing most harm to the environment. Ultimately, Addison's gaining of innocence involves an important realization on his part: that the mythic pattern of fall and regeneration he has been involved in acting out is not the only way of ordering reality. This insight grows out of Master McGrath's encounter with "K. E. Charlton, the poet", an incident which makes McGrath realize that to attempt to exclude television commercials is misguided because based on an unworkable ethic of self-denial:

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# oberon

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He is a soul that has broken free of the meat. Nothing else is given room in him. He saw the Squeasy commercial while we waited for the news. We were at the time anxious to hear news of the war. Well, there it was, Addison, the Squeasy message and K. E. Charlton's face undisturbed. The sensitive cheekbones thin and sharp as paper. No disturbance there, watching the Squeasy pitchman and waiting for the news. A perfect shield, would you guess, by the poet? In fact, no. No, he was letting it through. Not a shield, an acceptance of preposterousness. An acceptance of its right to invade his mind . . . I came to the conclusion that the yellow floor debate should continue to upset the poets. It's a poet's duty, as I decided afterward, to put a new-minted shine on all our worn-out currencies.

Thus Addison's final epiphany — one which allows him to regain his lost daughter and escape from the urban insanity which threatens him — is his realization that the duality on which he has based his actions has no basis. He no more needs to kill off the old Addison than Charlton needed to turn off the Squeasy ad; instead he must harness the undirected energies which he had incorrectly assumed were undesirable, thereby finding salvation in the fallen state itself. As a chronicler of his society Addison's theme has always been "the destructiveness of energy without sanity". When he realizes that energy and sanity need not be opposed, he achieves a union of the two, attaining the possibility of peace for himself and becoming a pattern for all men and for society. In this conclusion he becomes an arkwright indeed, fashioning a metaphorical raft that offers man the opportunity to ride out his self-created deluge. Simpson has written a fine, thoughtful novel here, one which makes him a writer to watch.

*Night of the White Bear* offers an informative contrast with *Arkwright*. Simpson's novel is very contemporary in its use

of a highly subjective I-narrator unfolding a rather disordered tale, in its ingenious playing with myth, and in its self-conscious parodying of the novel as form. Knox's book is of an old-fashioned cut by comparison. It employs an omniscient author telling a straight-forward tale without a hint of irony. Its mythic quality (for this it shares with *Arkwright*) is present not at the level of explicit statement, but is inherent in the action it describes — as mythic themes are inevitably invoked by simple actions and large scope. And the novel takes its literal, informational level very seriously, providing the reader with a short glossary of Eskimo terms at the onset, trying in every incident it describes to give the reader some feeling of what it means to be *Inuk*, one of the people.

But the book does more than simply attempt to recreate an exotic way of life for a curious reader. It focuses on Uglik, an Eskimo youth who has lost not only his parents but, by going to live with the soldiers of The Station, his entire heritage. The novel follows him on his quest to fill that void in a pilgrimage away from modern civilization and toward what he pictures as a true home among the people of the North. Uglik finds himself a man caught between two cultures; however, a member of neither. The chaos and the fear that await a man without the protection of a social unit are personified by the bear that stalks him through the novel, a grim reminder of the bear that took his father from him. Knox carefully guides the development of his narrative so that without our being aware, its archetype has changed from the Ulysses myth, man in quest of his spiritual home, to the Inferno myth, man descending into the depths of the unknown so

that he may meet whatever lies at the deepest riches of the pit. Thus Uglik moves despite himself in ever narrowing circles around the bear, finally confronting him in the depths of the white wasteland. The confrontation frees him and allows him to complete his journey northward, even as it is Dante's encounter with Satan at the bottom of the Inferno that lets him escape upward again. Appropriately enough when Uglik reaches Tintagel, his goal throughout his journey, he discovers not the paradise he envisioned — instead he finds there a purgatory that serves only to prepare him for the continuance of his quest. For he discovers

that he can be a member neither of the old culture nor of the new. Like Addison, his final insight is one which allows him to cease seeing the world as a duality; he can accept the best of both alternatives, he can affirm what is good in either culture while celebrating his freedom from both.

*Night of the White Bear* and *Arkwright* both stand as solid novelistic achievements. Each comments in its own way on man's need to escape the sterility of contemporary society, each suggesting that the alternatives are not as easily identified as one might believe.

## THE MODERNISTS AND THEIR PRECURSORS

*George Woodcock*

WILLIAM C. WEES, *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*. Toronto, \$15.00.

HUGH KENNER, *The Pound Era*. University of California Press, \$14.95.

LEON EDEL, *Henry James: 1901-1916*. McClelland & Stewart, \$14.95.

ELLIOTT B. GOSE, JR., *Imagination indulged*. McGill-Queen's, \$8.50.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT, in its historical sense, has ceased to be contemporary. Already, before he died in 1968, one of its leading spokesmen, Herbert Read, was declaring that movements in the visual arts during the 1960's were counter-evolutionary if one accepted the movement that began with Cézanne and ended with Abstract Impressionism as revolutionary. Thirty years earlier Read had already voiced his view that in poetry the Modern Movement, as it derived from the Symbolists and culminated in Eliot and Pound, was drawing to an end;

this, I believe, was a premature judgment, traceable to Read's own failure to develop as a poet very much beyond his Imagist origins. But I would support any argument made today that, whatever current may now be running in literature, it is something different from the great spring tide which during the first decade of the nineteenth century took all the arts in its flow from country to country across the western world, and produced, when one views the vast sweep from Proust to Pound, from Joyce to Kafka, from Eliot to Neruda, from Gide to Lawrence, from

Valéry to Auden, from Faulkner to Camus, from Hemingway to Silone, from Pirandello to Brecht, perhaps the greatest quantity and certainly the greatest variety of major literature written in any half century since man began to translate into marks on paper the creations of his imagination.

The sense that the Modern Movement has passed into history is one reason why so many critical and historical works are now being devoted to aspects of the movement and to its leading figures. One to whom much attention has been given in the past three or four years is Wyndham Lewis, long-neglected contemporary and associate of better-known men like Pound and Eliot and — one now begins to perceive — a key figure for understanding his times. Lewis's writings have been subjected to a number of recent studies, some printed in *Canadian Literature*, and recently Walter Michel published the first thorough examination of his paintings and drawings. Now, in *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*, William C. Wees, an American scholar migrated to Canada, tells the brief but dramatic history of the movement with which Lewis's name is peculiarly associated.

Not, of course, that Lewis was the only Vorticist. As Wees shows, Pound had a good hand in formulating the guiding principles of the movement, and that godfather of the pre-war English avant-garde, Ford Madox Ford, was more involved than his own kind of writing might lead one to expect. Vorticism in fact was the extreme expression of English efforts during the years immediately before the first World War to assimilate the revolutionary influence of Modernist ideas and artifacts emanating from the

continent of Europe. It was a reaction against the shallow machinism of the Futurists, and it had the distinction of being the only clearly defined and self-conscious movement in modern art that actually emanated from Britain.

*Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde* is by no means all about the actions of Lewis and his associates, which culminated in the publication of the first issue of *Blast* in the summer of 1914 and petered out — at least as far as Vorticism itself was concerned — a month or so afterwards when a shot in Sarajevo triggered off an explosion far louder than the artistic bombshell which the rebels in London had thought to detonate. The aim of Dr. Wees is really to set Vorticism in its period context, and to display it as the purest and most extreme manifestation of a condition of social unease and intellectual rebellion which gave the years from 1910 to 1914 their especially frenetic character, so that when one looks back over them it is difficult to believe they could have ended in any other way than a conflict of unprecedented dimensions. War or Revolution — there seemed no other alternatives for the future, and in the perspective of history — refracted by hindsight — it often appears a mere accident that War was, by less than three years, the first to arrive.

Dr. Wees sketches out with vivid brevity the parts played by suffragettes and syndicalists in these crucial years, the effect of the pre-war Post-Impressionist Exhibitions on English tastes and sensibilities, and the way in which Futurism seized the imagination of the decadent post-Edwardian social world and became a vulgarized fashion in very much the same way as Pop Art became a vulgarized fashion in our own day. Indeed, the

parallels between those years and the last years of the Sixties are often extraordinary, and one sometimes feels that it is not only historical distance but also a feeling that we ourselves have gone through very similar experiences which makes these vital years of the Modern Movement so interesting and — it seems — so comprehensible to us today. *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde* is one of the best recent works on that movement, and not least for its shrewd sketches of some of the leading figures who clustered around the Vorticists, such as the sculptor Gaudier, whose extraordinary promise was lost when he returned to die on a French battlefield.

Hugh Kenner, a Canadian lost — it seems — to the New Rome, deals somewhat differently with the background to the Modern Movement by means of a curious book entitled *The Pound Era*. It is hard to trap this Protean work in any simple category. It is not — in a recognized way — biography or literary history or literary criticism, but it is something of all of them, and perhaps most of all it is an attempt to distil the spirit of Modernism in a belated Modernist work. Discontinuity, fragmentation, indirection, flow without logic, logic without flow, all these attributes of Modernist writing at its most recondite characterize this vast volume of more than five hundred pages which seeks to set Pound in his time — a time that lasts more than sixty years.

This is not an easy book to read — impossible indeed to take in at all thoroughly on one's first way through its labyrinthine paths — and I suspect that Kenner has taken some delight in complicating the entrances to the sanctuary where he preserves his personal vision of Pound. He is writing with Stendhalian obstinacy

for the Happy Few, and it takes patience to qualify as one of them by establishing in one's mind the relationship between the insights which, retaining Pound's and Eliot's youthful delight in "fragments", he presents to us in sequences for which we must often create our own mental reorderings. He is attempting to portray a career in which — as in the career of all real artists — all the important events are in a sense coterminous because all works of poetry that survive are equally immediate in their impact. He is waging again the classic Modernist battle against durational conceptions of time, and the result is a book which seems less like a history than a charting of some archaeological site like Byblos where one can see the relics of many ages surviving together and therefore — whatever their *age* — equal in time. Which, after all, is a valid way to present the achievement of an artist, since to the aesthetic eye or ear it does not matter in the least how many years *Hamlet* was written before *A Winter's Tale*; they belong to the same continuum of experience. By its very nature, *The Pound Era* cannot — would not — claim to be a conclusive book. It is less the work of a scholar than of an enthusiast, but for that very reason worth reading by those who can afford to give it discontinuous time.

Kenner tells once again, among his fragments, the story of the crucial revelation at Giessen in 1911 when Pound took a handful of romanticist poems to Ford Madox Ford, and Ford rolled on the floor in mirth when he read them, an exercise that salutorily convinced Pound that he must abandon outworn conventions and find his own speech. This tale which, like much in *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*, emphasizes Ford's

extraordinary position as a mediating figure between pre-Raphaelitism and Symbolism on one hand and Modernism on the other, brings me to the fault that perhaps stuck most roughly in my mind's craw when I read the final and fifth volume of Leon Edel's marathon biography of Henry James, *The Master: 1901-1916*.

In a review of the preceding volume of Edel's massive task, I talked of the sleekness and imperviousness which impressed me as the dominant qualities of the portions of the Life that had so far appeared, and my view is not essentially changed by this culminating volume. Much of the material is absorbingly interesting; after all, it concerns James and would be so in any context. But the mandarin dulness that pervades the prose of *The Master* when it is not quotation is linked with an obviousness of conception which is no more clearly exemplified than in the title of the volume itself. Surely to talk of James as The Master has now become such a cliché that it can be done only in irony, yet I am sure Edel is not being ironic, and that his use of the fatally obvious title is an aspect of the heavy relentlessness with which he has piled his critical Pelions on his biographical Ossas to produce a quivering mountain of academic prowess.

Except indeed for the biographical details so patiently sifted and assembled — and a debt of respect is owed for such labours — there is really not much in *The Master* that reveals originality of critical insight, though Dr. Edel has been so much in the company of James that he could not fail to emerge with some very plausible *biographical* conjectures. But his general critical unsureness, particularly when he turns away from James,

is shown up clearly when he deals with the novelist's literary associates. There is a curious disproportion in a view of writing in our age that can treat Hugh Walpole as more important than Ford Madox Ford. I am not convinced that James thought as little of Ford as Edel claims he did, but in any case Edel's treatment of Ford as merely an importunate nuisance and a lying memorist, and his failure to recognize his historical importance as editor of the *English Review* and his achievement in writing the tetralogy now known as *Parade's End* (which surely showed a thorough and intelligent grasp of whatever James had to teach in the art of the novel), can only lead one to doubt his right to be taken seriously as a critic, though of course they do not negate his journeyman's mastery of the basic skills of the biographer.

The absurdities of amateur psychoanalysts posing as critics have led one to approach gingerly any book that avowedly uses the insights of Freud or Jung to interpret works of literature. Yet it has always depended on whether critical sensibility or psychoanalytical dogma has been in control, and there is no doubt that — to repeat a name mentioned at the beginning of this article — Herbert Read owed his success as an exponent of the visual arts and as a critic of the Romantic poets to a sensitive and cautious use of Jungian ideas. Elliot B. Gose, author of *Imagination Indulged*, the last of this group of excursions by Canadian scholars into other literatures, is frank about his debt to Jung, but his general approach is very much his own, as he traces, from the early Gothic novels through a series of selected 19th century masterpieces, the development of a kind

of novel which depends for its effect on the tension between the rationality of the external world and the irrationality of the inner.

I must say that I felt apprehensive when I read the opinion Gose expressed in his preface, that the novels of writers like Dickens and Hardy and Conrad were "called into being in an attempt to cope with acute psychic distress." There seemed a threat of yet another study of art as the product of a pathological condition, but in fact Gose is as conscious as the novelists of whom he writes of the extent to which their works were deliberate artifacts, and I find a later statement truer to his actual practice:

I can say only that it seems farfetched to assume that a story will *not* contain something of the psychic life of its author. By using his imagination he is, after all, calling on what he has deeply felt, what animates his nature, what has to come out of him.

In treating with special attention *Wuthering Heights*, *Bleak House*, *The Return of the Native* and *Lord Jim*, Gose carefully avoids presenting us with four dissociated case studies, which is what the psychoanalyst dealing with literature would be tempted to do. He is conscious of the importance of tradition, and analyses carefully the psychological and literary significance of the fairy tale and the romance, and their incorporation into the tradition of the novel as it developed during the nineteenth century. One realizes in following this process how carefully Gose has kept to his own dictum that "The psychological and the formalist coalesce when one focuses on the working of the imagination", and one cannot accuse him of neglecting the formal aspects of the works he studies. In fact, far more

than showing us authors coping with "acute psychic distress", he shows them subordinating myth and romance, dream and fantasy, to their formal purposes by means of artifice, while he remains profoundly conscious of the origins in collective movements of thought (e.g. the reactions of Darwinism), as much as in personal unconscious conflicts, of the psychological elements within the novels he discusses.

Good books set thoughts moving around them. *Imagination Indulged* made me more sharply aware than I had been before of a gap in our study of the psychology of literature. We often consider the psychology of creativity—the elements of an author's mind that enter into his books. But we rarely consider the psychological aspects of an author's relationship with his audience—how far his work is in fact shaped by his insights into the inner needs of his readers. The evidence which Gose presents regarding the creative methods of Dickens leaves little doubt in my mind that *some* of the irrational elements in his novels—perhaps most of them—were introduced not from inner compulsion, not by command of the imagination, but quite deliberately because Dickens calculated that this was what the public wanted and cultivated the fanciful side of his intelligence accordingly. In doing so he was being the psychoanalyst rather than the subject of psychoanalysis, and there is room for much more study of how far writers hold up mirrors consciously to their ages and their readers as well as unconsciously to themselves.

But that is another task than what Dr. Gose has accomplished with so much intelligence and restraint.

## DEEP CAVES AND KITCHEN LINOLEUM

ALICE MUNRO, *Lives of Girls and Women*.  
McGraw-Hill Ryerson, \$6.95.

ALICE MUNRO's first novel is about a sensitive young girl growing up in a small Ontario town in the 1940's. To say as much is to summon up the arthritic ghosts of a thousand other first novels from library vault and desk drawer, and to suggest the kind of risk an author takes writing a conventional village bildungsroman in this age of pop, camp, funk, porno, and junk. The basic movement of *Lives of Girls and Women* is conventional to a fault: the protagonist discovers sex, comes into contact with death and madness, learns sympathy for her parents, casts a cold eye on zany relations and friends, finds there is good and evil in her backwater microcosm of society, and, at the end, contemplates a horizon-expanding flight to the metropolis (Toronto). This is the universal pattern for a first novel, although the British might require more misery at public school, the French more adultery, the Americans more violence. But not only does Munro dare to use the pattern again, she also tempts the fate of repeating her own early work, since the town of Jubilee and some of the characters in the novel first appeared in her fine short-story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). Considered in the abstract, *Lives of Girls and Women* shouldn't amount to much, but reading the book proves that novels

should never be considered in the abstract and that a good writer can do almost anything and make it work.

It works largely because Munro hasn't forgotten a thing about lower-middle-class life in the drab and frugal Forties. Her class bias is unusual when one considers how often Ontario small towns are shaped into those safe, bourgeois organisms sustaining clergymen, lawyers and young lovers, just right for slightly academic comedy of manners (Robertson Davies, Stephen Leacock) or lyrical-gothic allegory (James Reaney). In Munro's work we see Ontario social myths from the bottom up; the poverty line runs smack through her part of town and her characters seem curiously estranged from their environment: the men struggle in silence to earn a living, the women — Munro's particular concern — are shown to be troubled by isolation and unfulfilled dreams. Abused girls slip into insanity or leap into the river; pregnant girls stumble grimly on into marriage; the female high-school graduate searches out a secretarial job, layaway plans, a Saturday date for the Gay-la Dance Hall, and a husband who is neither goof-off nor drunk nor religious fanatic. Unmarried ladies sing "O Promise Me" in the church choir and study pornographic verse in private; married women sell encyclopedias door to door to make ends meet and to get out of the house. Mariposa it isn't.

Del Jordan, the novel's narrator and quasi-heroine, goes from Grade Four to defloration critically observing the examples around her but finding few guidelines for her own conduct. Her mother says that keeping one's self-respect is the only way "woman's burden" may be tolerated, but Del resists the advice, because her mother gives it and because



she hopes to live as men seem to: free and undamaged by experience. Keeping one's self-respect is not Del's forte anyway; her encounters with men are less dramas of liberation than farces of desperation and inadvertence. A middle-aged radio announcer, given to jovial crotch-thumps and nipple-squeezes, takes Del into the woods to prove that he can masturbate, causing her to lose a child-like faith in the fascination of depravity. Later she strips for a boyfriend, a sneery, math-minded high school sort of genius, but is shoved into the cellar when his mother comes home, her clothes dropped after her through the laundry chute. At last she loses her virginity propped up over the peony border at the side of the house, but when her lover — who picked her up at a revival meeting and has marriage on his mind — tries baptizing her in the river, she fights back, literally, for her independence: "I thought that he might drown me . . . I thought that I was fighting for my life." By resisting, Del loses the chance to become another forlorn Jubilee housewife, but salvages her soul, and in the novel's epilogue the dawn of her ambition to be a writer suggests another, better way she can "have" her hometown without being trapped in it forever.

A woman told me that Del's baptismal fight in the river was a gutsy metaphor for "the whole modern male-female thing", and I can see that the novel could be interpreted as one of the new Condition-of-Women tracts, although the usual features of the genre — gloom, paranoia, gritted teeth, maxims about survival — are sabotaged or enriched by Munro's sense of humour. However, Del's sexual progress is mostly confined to the last two chapters; much of the time she is there

to comment on the lives of everyone else in Jubilee, which seems to be the author's real subject. In the epilogue, the novel Del is planning to write will turn Jubilee into a hybrid of Faulkner's *Jefferson* and *Wuthering Heights*, with decaying manses and crazed maidens and gibbering idiots and a demon photographer whose pictures reveal the hideous *truth* about everybody. The narrative voice reflects that some day Del will want the town as it actually was, without the gothic frosting; she will struggle to remember the accurate, meaningful detail and realize that "people's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable — deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum." The epilogue is subtitled "The Photographer" and is undoubtedly a statement of the author's own artistic purposes, with the fictional realist defined as a not-quite-demonic photographer who strives to reveal important truths through pictures of "ordinary" surfaces.

The epilogue made me slightly uncomfortable, as if it were an advertisement for the writer's abilities rather than an afterword organically connected to the novel itself. Certainly there's no question about Munro's talent as a photographer: she reminds us that old ladies patrol the streets of small towns from wicker chairs on the veranda; that United Church windows depict "Christ performing useful miracles"; that families used to watch the sunset from concrete slabs at the back of the house. She is precise about those mixed feelings we used to have towards self-styled Best Friends and the sweaty intrigues set afloat by the Grade Seven operetta. Yet the novel is not merely an exercise in regional nostalgia; there is reference to the larger rhythms of life, as

is indicated by the chapter titles — “Age of Faith”, “Changes and Ceremonies”, “Baptizing” — and Del repeatedly wonders at the bizarre twists in people’s lives, at the destinies that shape our ends. But somehow it’s not enough; the book, good as it is, never quite jells into the major piece of serious fiction I suspect the author intended it to be.

A reason for this may lie in the novel’s loosely-woven, anecdotal structure, in which the chapters, basically unpruned short stories, are casually linked together by Del’s consciousness, an arrangement rather like the one Margaret Laurence used for *A Bird in the House*. Then too, Del herself, so often the observer or victim, is not strong enough as a character in her own right to galvanize the reader’s concern, and getting it all from her point of view seems to limit the scope of Munro’s own vision. At least, re-reading *Dance of the Happy Shades* after the novel, I was surprised at the wallop these brief and apparently “conventional” stories are able to pack. In the one about the small-town pickup, for example, or the live-in maid among the rich, or the girl who burns her baby brother to death, or the woman who lets her grotesque mother die, or the Italian immigrant girl who is a social outcast until she is safely in the hospital dying of leukemia, characters whose lives aren’t going anywhere take on a tragic dimension, like Melvillean anti-heroes, through the very strength of their hopelessness. It’s dirty pool to compare novels with stories and downright peevish to pick nits about such a pleasurable read as *Lives of Girls and Women*, but where both the novel and the stories are funny, well-written, and evocative, it seems the novel misses out on that black, brutal cutting edge that

gives the stories their idiosyncratic power.

If the novel falls short of its own ambitions, it is a remarkable book nonetheless and should be purchased (not borrowed from the library, but paid for) by those who want something good to read for a change, and by those who are interested in the development of one of Canada’s foremost prose writers. Reading Alice Munro’s work is one of the joys of literacy; for the numerous typographical errors and the shabby design of the book itself, her publishers should, possibly, be forgiven.

JAMES POLK

## GASTRONOMIC CANADA

SONDRA GOTLIEB, *The Gourmet’s Canada*. new press, \$7.95.

GEORGE BAIN, *Champagne is for Breakfast*. new press, \$6.95.

*Where to Eat in Canada, 1972-73*, edited by Anne Hardy. Oberon Press, \$2.95.

THE BEST BOOKS on food have always been something more than mere guides to experience in good eating. They have said in a concrete but often very vivid and enlivening way a great deal about the societies whose culinary habits they describe, and not merely in terms of actual dishes and of their ingredients: not even merely in terms of the complex individual physical and mental experience of eating, but also in terms of social and even aesthetic attitudes. Painting in a different media from other writers, the gourmet can present his own interesting and individual picture of a society. One can hardly imagine Brillat-Savarin, for example, emerging from any world but that of the First Empire and the Restora-

tion in France, which also produced Balzac and Stendhal. And one of the most enlightening books I possess on England in the age of Waterloo is a foxed and battered volume entitled *A New System of Domestic Cookery formed upon Principles of Economy and adapted to the use of Private Families*, written by "A Lady" and issued by John Murray, Byron's publisher, in 1807. As I read through the hundreds of pages of rich and highly-flavoured recipes (those lashings of cream and brandy!), as I stare with awe on the stupendous family menus ("Nine Dishes, Two Removes, and Eleven", for example — the eleven being pretty substantial side-dishes), when I look through the hints on running the dairy and the poultry yard, the "Directions to Servants" and the "Cookery for the Poor", a whole lost layer of the past appears — the layer that gives material solidity and depth to the world of *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Prelude*.

I am convinced that an interest in food and wine — or the best possible local substitute for wine — is a symptom of vigour rather than of decadence in a society. The fact that France is still — though perhaps every year a little less so — a country of dedicated gourmets is a facet of the obstinacy with which the French have — despite appearances — resisted the spread of the universalized Americanoid culture, which is least strong precisely in the great gastronomist areas of the country like Burgundy, Bresse and the Franche-Comté. The survival of splendid cooking in Peking is a manifestation of the silent and enduring rebellion of the true China against the barbarities of the Cultural Revolution, a rebellion of the most basic of the arts which suggests that the higher arts of painting and

poetry may not wholly be lost and at some time, perhaps not very far ahead, will surface with all their peculiar Chinese combination of delicacy and sinewy vigour. And in Canada it is surely an auspicious sign that recently our books on food and where to get it have — like our fiction — become pronouncedly more sophisticated and more worth reading not merely as guides to eating but as books in the full sense.

A measure of the speed with which we are diversifying and deepening our interest in food, and relating it to other aspects of our country's culture can be seen if we compare a good book on feeding in Canada which appeared first in 1971 (*Where to Eat in Canada*) with a much better book — *The Gourmet's Canada* by Sondra Gotlieb — which has just come off the press.

*Where to Eat in Canada 1972-73* is the updated revision of a useful handbook, edited by Anne Hardy, which Oberon Press issued last year for the first time and presumably intends to make a biennial event. There is a small, bright introduction on regional Canadian foods, and this is followed by a series of entries on three hundred or so eating places ranging across the country from Victoria, B.C., to Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, with sorties into Yellowknife and Whitehorse. The approach is critical so far as service and food are concerned, but the reporters — or inspectors as they ominously call themselves — tend to be over-interested in decor, which always raises prices, and though some good and inexpensive restaurants are included, the recommendations tend to favour the pockets of better-off travellers; mainly, they are the kind of places I find myself

patronizing once or twice only on a cross-country journey.

There are some odd entries: e.g.

**HEDLEY, B.C. THE GAS STATION**  
*You can't eat in Kelowna, so watch for the gas station at Hedley. It's said to have good homecooked and homemade food. Not yet tested.*

This is erroneous on three counts—which should be a lesson to the editors not to rely on hearsay. First, there is *one* very reasonable restaurant in Kelowna which serves good home-cooked food, but it is in a back street and the clientele consists almost entirely of knowledgeable local people. Secondly, anyone travelling on from Kelowna at lunchtime will get pretty hungry by the time he reaches Hedley, which is an hour and a half away, and Penticton, where the Chalet is justly recommended, is much nearer. Thirdly, it is not a gas station in Hedley that has made its name for good food, but the Colonial, an old house in a large garden with excellent country cooking; however, there *is* a gas station café at *Princeton*, up the valley from Hedley, which serves something better than the average trunk road meals.

For those on holiday with well-stuffed wallets, *Where to Eat in Canada* is a useful guide to have in the glove compartment; its main defect is that, being prepared by a committee of writers rather than an individual enthusiast, its entries differ a great deal in sharpness of palatal perception. Inevitably, also, there have been shifts in quality, and I would not now recommend (and in some cases never would have recommended) all the places listed here in my home town. However, we are promised perennial revision, in which the reader's assistance is invited.

At best, *Where to Eat in Canada* is a

good practical guide. *The Gourmet's Canada* is something quite different, in character and scope, and if I read *Where to Eat* to be informed, and gained merely information from it, I found myself, when I opened *The Gourmet's Canada*, immersed in a real book, written by an individual who projects a richly enthusiastic and idiosyncratic personality, and dedicated not merely to talking about what food can be got in Canada, but also to a full-scale interpretation of our land and our culture seen from the gastronomic viewpoint—a viewpoint determined not merely by the tastebuds and the intestinal muscles, but equally by the aesthetic eye and the lyrical imagination.

*The Gourmet's Canada* begins—and this first cluster of chapters should win over any patriot with the least interest in the pleasures of cup and trencher—with a brief vivid autobiography of the author as gastronome, followed by a great food-searching journey across Canada, a veritable Odyssey of exploration, in which the author seeks out regional foods and dishes, talks of their natural and social history, relates them to local life styles, garnishes the narrative with evocative portraits of mute inglorious Parmentiers lost in our villages and towns, brings alive places where people eat, grow and sell food, discusses with vigour such questions of gastronomic politics as the fate of Canadian caviar and Atlantic salmon, and gives us the sense of a land rich in possibilities that may well be lost if we do not quickly come to the realization that not everything good can be either mass produced or indiscriminately squandered. Sondra Gotlieb has been an indefatigable explorer, and her cross-Canada narrative is packed with information about precisely what, with a little care,

one can find in terms of regional food products and traditional dishes. A reassuringly rich and inviting harvest it is.

At the same time, Mrs. Gotlieb is fully aware that gastronomy, if it must have its roots solidly in soil of local cultivation, cannot bear fruit without international pollination, and another useful chapter of her book is a listing, selective but astute, of the shops in Canada where one can find those ingredients of good eating — home-produced and imported — in which the supermarkets always fail. Just as useful are the chapters on eating places, for the author realizes that few people can always eat in the expensive once-in-a-season haunts where the decor is more reliable than the food; so she begins her survey with a list of the places where one is well dined for under \$3 a meal, and only then discusses with rigorous selectivity those high-priced places where, irrespective of setting, the food is worth the money. All Canadians who have gastronomic ambitions — and the quality of our civilization depends on their increase — should read this book, and so, for that matter, should anyone who aims at a full understanding of Canadian society.

*The Gourmet's Canada* ends with a chapter on wines, but, while useful, this is the least exciting part of the book; the author's first and enduring love is food, with wine a congenial but not essential attendant. Fortunately new press has published at the same time a complementary book — George Bain's *Champagne is for Breakfast* — on wines in Canada. It is a sound collection of information, full of historical and topographical facts about wine growing, knowledgeable discussion of the qualities of wines, and hints of how one may wine well in vari-

ous parts of Canada in spite of the difficulties imposed by liquor commissions. It is a good guide to what can be bought, and it even contains recipes for local dishes that go with the wines of their regions. The fault of the book, especially after the natural humour and zest of *The Gourmet's Canada*, is a frequent and embarrassingly self-conscious facetiousness of tone. The jokes are bad, the puns are execrable, but the advice they garnish is excellent. If only Mr. Bain had remembered the proverbial wisdom: A good wine needs no bush!

ANTHONY APPENZELL

## MOD MODEL

MARTIN MYERS, *The Assignment*. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$9.95.

THIS IS A BRILLIANT NOVEL about . . . all those other brilliant novels you've read. Here the reader may satisfy his every taste for the Modern. A gentle, compassionate, ironic Jew of mythological dimensions for a hero, the use of filmic terms for chapter headings, black humour and outrageous-deadpan dialogue, a treatment of the perpetual tussle between good and evil: remind you of any other works you've read?

What a useful work for anyone teaching Twentieth Century fiction! Simply wind up the student, place a scissors in his hands, and tell him to clip the relevant phenomena as he zips through this lively satire, the sort of satire that stems from an admiration for the conventions parodied. That's very important: loving one's target. *The Rape of the Lock* came from the pen of one of Homer's most passionate students.

Myers' work reminds me of so many others, a mark of effective parody, but most of all of a favourite, Thomas Pynchon's *V*. In high paranoid style, the novel accumulates details — seeming markers of the movements of sinister forces — that turn out to be leitmotifs rather than revelations. Then an initially indecipherable plot turns out to be, not a linear narrative sequence, but a series of still shots of a larger process the writer doesn't depict in detail. And so the reader relaxes, content to let the symbolism sort itself out, leaving the detective work for later or never, depending upon the degree of coherence he values in a book.

Spiegel, the hero, is a junk collector. "But is he really only a junk collector?" booms a portentous voice that nags at every reader of *Contemp. Lit.* And of course Spiegel is more than that. "The seeker of things used", to adopt Myers' Homeric epithet for his creation, is on Assignment; he is the Wandering Jew who has gone about his business for centuries at the orders of the Chief Assigning Officer, a heavenly personage who at one point brings Spiegel back from the dead. On a technicality. The hero's errand appears to be the avoidance of the traps set by Jonas, the one-eyed, multimillionaire president of Leviathan Corp. (nuff said), and the preservation of a child he has found not quite by accident. Do you really want me to continue?

In one way or another, the plot is worked out. It isn't very gripping anyway. Did you read *Candide* to find out how the story came out? The fun is found in the situations encountered and the observations gained. Some of the games people play that come under wry observation are: mental health, parenthood, the law, religion, sex, technology, novel

writing. Martin Myers finds each of these activities a lot of laughs, depicting them as so intermixed with joy and guilt, wisdom and folly as to make irony and laughter the sole fitting response to them.

Wit abounds in the dialogue; Myers has a way with names (Dr. Plassibeau, Mickey Culpa, Desirée Poodendim), and while he is obliged to make Spiegel a Christ figure, he has the junkman face his successive interrogators with comebacks, one-liners and the brutal nonsenses Jesus enjoyed laying on heavy questioners. There are good sentences in the book:

So they [agreed to call homosexuality an idiosyncrasy], and that was why, when the elevator came to a stop at the street floor, a crowded lobbyful of short, plump, middle-aged women with frizzy hair, crooked lipstick, and sensible oxfords, each carrying a paper cup of coffee and a pack of cigarettes and trying to get into the elevator, almost crushed two grown men who were busily calling homosexuality an idiosyncrasy.

Of course Spiegel bungles his assignment, accepting "reality" when he elects to return to a home and identity the shrinks assure him is his own. In the meantime, the reader has been treated to an amusing, two-dimensional panorama of life in the present. The trick with satire is to keep it trim. There are times, especially in the second section, when the book goes on too long at too forced a pace. But my boredom then was a small price to pay for the verve and slyness of the opening. To capture the deadpan flatness of Vonnegut and sustain it alongside what is at least the apparatus of a metaphysical fable denotes considerable writing skill. To interleave this with an examination of the problems of storytelling indicates that the writer — a first-time novelist in his forties whom the Canada Council wouldn't support —

doesn't fear to take a chance. He has written a novel that cannot coast along on passionately written autobiographical material when invention flags. Gutsy for a beginner.

Maybe I missed the message. Maybe *The Assignment* is a profound, Kafkaesque treatment of the human condition. I prefer to hope it's not. For me, it is a heavy-hearted burlesque on themes too profound always to be taken seriously, the creation of a subtle and inventive mind. Sometimes, I found myself laughing as I read it. Sometimes, not.

DENNIS DUFFY

## NOVEL NO STORY

GEORGE PAYERLE, *The Afterpeople*. Anansi, \$2.50.

"Oh dear yes!" wrote E. M. Forster, "the novel tells a story." The reader of George Payerle's *The Afterpeople* might be forgiven for wondering if Forster was perhaps mistaken, for "story" in the traditional sense is hard to find in this short novel. It is evidently part of the author's intention to cast aside such an outmoded convention, in favour of a more impressionistic rendering of reality. There is certainly the basis of a plot, which turns upon a bank robbery in which two men shoot and carry off a female bank teller; the event is recounted from several different angles, and various characters make their appearance who are associated, often rather obscurely, with the central action. Figures with blackly comical names like Chief Ironstem, Shamble and Groin wander on and off a surrealistic set vaguely recognizable as Vancouver; their identity is never clearly defined, and their relationship to one another is left

unexplained. The narrative develops through a series of episodes which move freely backwards and forwards in time; one section takes the form of a will, in which the novel and its characters are made the subject of a bequest; and from time to time the author appears in editorial brackets to claim, or disclaim, responsibility.

The confusion created by such techniques is of course deliberate; clearly, Mr. Payerle wants us to think again about the nature of experiential reality, and the impossibility of a final division between inner and outer worlds. He rejects conventional narrative methods in favour of an approach which might be described as a mixture of James Joyce and *Mad Magazine*, in order to create an atmosphere of nightmare in which "normal" standards of conduct are quite irrelevant. The dislocation of ordinary logic allows for some extraordinary effects, such as the pretended suicide by someone called B. who dismembers himself and puts the various pieces into individual brooch-boxes marked with the Birks monogram. The book is at its best in such moments as this; Mr. Payerle's sense of the grotesque gives his comedy a savage bite, and helps him to convey his sense of a world where sane and insane are no longer distinguishable.

The surrealistic method has its drawbacks, however. It does not permit much development of characters — usually one of the strengths of the novel form — because to give them attributes approaching full humanity would interfere with their symbolic functions and their dream-like freedom. Consequently, structure and language become much more prominent, themselves forming the action of the novel rather than remaining its vehicles;

and on this level it soon becomes evident that, although he has plenty of tricks at his disposal, Mr. Payerle's verbal ingenuity cannot supply the deficiencies of his material, or conceal the fact that these sketches are often simply *jeux d'esprit*, through which the author can exercise his interest in language and artifice. In his various narrative identities he is always conscious of his own role as creator, and so his novel, in the best modern manner, becomes an account of the writing of the novel. This in itself would not be accounted a failing; but the notion of literary artifice is introduced so crudely that the reader is made to feel that he is the victim of some obscure word-game in which the object is to confuse him by sudden changes in the rules. "I'm at home now. I just re-read what I have been writing. Now it is clear. I am the one responsible. I am writing the novel. I cannot find my other trousers. The girl tells me I have only one pair. . . ." Somewhat smugly, the narrator informs us that he is considered "an incompetent realist"; and it is plain that that narrative realism of the usual kind would be inadequate to convey his view of things. But the self-conscious virtuosity of *The Afterpeople* blunts the impact of that view, and interferes with the development of potentially fruitful ideas about society, art and individual consciousness. Even apparently direct statements suffer from an evident desire to be antithetical or cryptic: "an open door is very like a locked one"; "I have been told that to understand a book, one must close it." Such pronouncements are perhaps intended as parodies of conventional wisdom; but in any case, the book is often more concerned with verbal effects than with meanings.

Despite such weaknesses, it would be

unjust to withhold some measure of praise, for *The Afterpeople* is in parts both funny and provocative, and a not inconsiderable achievement for a first novel. Mr. Payerle shows a commendable sense of adventure, the kind of readiness to experiment with form and language that, as Michael Yates suggests on the cover, is much needed in Canadian writing. His exuberance may have led him into excess; but in this case too much is better than none at all.

HERBERT ROSENGARTEN

## LIGHT ON A DARK WOOD

MICHAEL BULLOCK, *green beginning, black ending*. Sono Nis Press, \$6.95.

POSIT A MAN, as Dante did, lost in "*una selva oscura*". When Dante wrote he was looking back, after the ultimate paradisaical vision. But for Michael Bullock there is only the dark wood and all one can be is lost in it. His guide whispers, "Stay. What you see exists, as does everything, to be made into art." It is, historically, the voice of Mallarmé, who was his own illusion.

This does not explain away a single sentence, much less any of the "fables", that make up Mr. Bullock's volume: the work is his, and he has wrought well, not vomited forth. Talent and labour have produced these polished gnostic visions.

During a resurgence of gnosticism, many will fail to see this element in Mr. Bullock's work; it is so long now since Wordsworth declared that to look into the Mind of Man would be the "haunt, and main region" of his song. Poe (whose



voice and attitude I hear in Mr. Bullock's prose) has come and gone; Mallarmé and the Symbolists inverted Aquinas's *Nomina sunt consequentia rerum*; realities (of a Platonistic sort) have become the by-product of language, and we live, as we read, within our own or the author's mind.

Words become things, things in turn menace writer and reader, since for the gnostic, reality is always a malefic vision: these simulacra called fables both mime and are the world beyond the trapped self. Here *things* are enemies; behind them are greater and unknown enemies set on destroying the narrator.

He is nearly always alone: a writer upon whom the subject is imposed, most adroitly, in the first paragraph of each fable when he is, often, sitting down to write a story. In the beginning, he admits into his home a green girl who says her name is Selva — Italian for forest. For the author, a sex-object that conquers him through a series of metamorphoses. Murdered, she brings an invasion of magnolia trees, and in burning them the author burns his own home, which will soon be reclaimed by vegetation: the forest, or "nature", has won.

And, throughout the book, "nature"

continues to conquer. It is the same reality which Coleridge found indifferent to man; the one to which *we*, he wrote in an ode called "Dejection", give life. Again and again, the plot is the Eternal Return: one is in an impasse from which there is no escape; the door out of prison leads to another cell. We are prisoners, with the author, of a precise and self-bound logic divorced from the existent.

We should expect to be. In *The Field of Nonsense* Elizabeth Sewell, writing of Lewis Carroll, explicates Mr. Bullock's position. As with Carroll, his "is not a universe of things but of words and ways of using them . . . one need not discuss the co-called unreality or reality of the Nonsense world. The scope of enquiry is limited to what goes on inside a mind . . ." Dante encountered it: those who have lost *il ben del intelletto* — the ability to know and love what is not themselves; they can only conquer it or replace it. Their works, "like games, have nothing to do with such a notion as 'truth'." They prefer to deal with things rather than people, words rather than content, the verbal rather than the real.

Treated as a game, Mr. Bullock's book is perfectly played. He is the witty spectator of his feigned illusions. The black

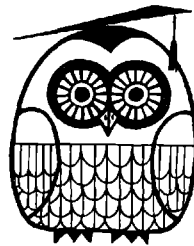
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ending? Her name is Noire — though that is not the only meaning, for ambiguity is, as it must be, the essence. We are in the world of Renaissance magic and the Hermetic Tradition — as Borges, a more learned man, well knows. Pins in one's hands lead to a Tibetan monk, who announces, "Reality is..." and finally, "Reality is." Not what one expects from such an unsubstantial personage, or apposite in a vision that seals everything into itself. Yet Mr. Bullock's achievement is that one reads his fables as what they are: his urbane poise makes sure of that. His is the best of the Sono Nis books that I have seen; and he may well fault, as a teacher of translation, my anglicizing that press's name as "There is no person". To see where that can lead, follow the man who in mid-life came to to himself — in a vision sustained by a reality not, to him, ultimately dependent on the mind, but on which the mind depends if it is to know and be other than its sealed-in self.

JOHN REID

## CRYSTALS TO SEE THE PAST

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO Press has expanded its reprint programme in two notable directions. Shortly it will issue the first in a series of reprints of nineteenth century works of Canadian literature that appeal to a somewhat narrower public than is reached by the New Canadian Library; it will in fact complement that collection by providing in the end a virtually complete availability of the kind of texts which are constantly mentioned in

literary histories and in critical essays on the Colonial and Confederation periods, but which are difficult at present to find outside libraries. As the works in this series begin to appear, we shall devote to them a series of review articles that will be, in effect, reassessments of these books which, whatever their merits in global terms — and this aspect will not be neglected — are the only literary classics we possess from the days before the tide of modern Canadian writing began to flow in the 1920's and brought with it a sense of local identity we had not possessed before.

The other Toronto series, which has already begun to appear, is curiously entitled "The Social History of Canada". In fact it is not a "history" in any but the most diffuse sense, but rather a "library" or series of reprinted works which have a mainly social interest. Literary merits are incidental in the selection of these books, and it seems, from the titles that have so far appeared, that even in a wider sense their associations rather than their intrinsic merits have been the main reasons for selecting them. For example, J. S. Woodsworth is represented by *My Neighbour* (\$3.50) and *Strangers within our Gates* (\$3.95); if anyone other than Woodsworth had written them, it is unlikely that these long outdated pioneer works on urban and immigrant problems would have been resurrected, for they are badly planned and hastily assembled collections of facts and quotations culled from other authors and cobbled together with homiletic references to the social implications of Christian beliefs. Yet here we have relics not merely of the early years of a great Canadian, but also of the beginnings of our native form of socialism, a "chapel socialism" like the English,

largely springing from Methodist origins and to be embodied in the CCF and later in the NDP. Nellie McClung's *In Times like These* (\$2.95) now seems an incredibly clumsy piece of tractarianism, yet it not only reminds one of a tough old temperance fighter, but even more of the beginnings of Canadian feminism and of the long trail to Women's Lib.

Such minor works of social polemic are passing things, precisely because they do not make effective contact with the universal or the lasting, yet in them one does perhaps catch with a peculiar immediacy and intimacy the ways of thought and expression of educated and concerned people in the early years of this century. And if we find what they have to say trite or naive, it is often because they have made it unnecessary to say such things again.

There is none of this combination of perception and innocence in Goldwin Smith's *Canada and the Canadian Question* (\$3.50), which is not only a piece of self-consciously mandarin prose written by a friend of Matthew Arnold, but also a document of some intrinsic historical significance in view of its place in the controversy between imperialists and continentalists towards the end of the nineteenth century. That subject also makes it the only one among the Social History reprints so far published to have a topical flavour, for the argument in which Smith played such an eloquent part has come among us again with the nationalists taking the place of the imperialists — the enemy unchanged. The main difference is that no writer will be found in Canada today to say, as boldly as Smith did, that Canada has no future.

Last among the present batch of the "Social History of Canada" is the most

curious of all, a work of fiction which its editor frankly classes as "a bad novel". Alan Sullivan's *The Rapids* (\$3.95) is one of the rare Canadian examples of that interesting genre, the *roman à clef*; it is the story of a daring business man whose rise and fall are modelled on those of F. H. Clergue, the strange and dedicated priest of private enterprise who at the turn of the century started the exploitation of the forest and mineral resources around Lake Superior, and whose monument survives — or did when I was there five years ago — in the curious neo-Gothic outlines of the mills he built at Sault Ste-Marie. Perhaps one cannot escape Michael Bliss's verdict that *The Rapids* is bad as a novel — though I found some passages of landscape description very evocative of the region — but it does, as Bliss remarks, take us back into a different mental climate, to a Canada where the heroes were neither politicians nor sportsmen nor environmentalists, but tough and visionary business men whose burning passion to transform the land blinded them and their followers to the kind of destruction that transformation makes inevitable.

We shall look forward to more titles in the "Social History of Canada" which, if it does not seem destined to unearth for us lost diamonds of the literary art, at least gives us crystals in which we can see our past curiously and often disconcertingly reflected. But no more disconcertingly, I am sure, than what our descendants may read in a similar series fifty years hence, whose volumes will set them wondering about the strange minds that reacted to the tracts and essays of — say — Mel Watkins, Cy Gonick and Ian Adams.

The Canadiana Reprint Series of M.

G. Hurtig continues to produce its revivals from an even remoter past. Recent titles include Ballantyne's *Hudson's Bay* (introduced by George Woodcock — \$8.95), Alexander Ross's important pre-Riel account of Fort Garry and its environs, *The Red River Settlement* (introduced by W. L. Morton — \$8.95), and, best of all, Francis M'Clintock's vivid voyage diary, *A Narrative of the Discovery of the Fate of Sir John Franklin and his Companions* (introduced by W. C. Wonders — \$8.95). Also from Hurtig comes a timely reprint of Hugh MacLennan's *Cross-Country* (\$5.95), his book of essays on Canada and Canadians which first appeared in 1949 and has long been out of print. MacLennan has accompanied the re-issue with a long new introduction which takes the form of a self-criticism of his earlier writing persona; it is an invaluable document, not only of MacLennan's own mental development over a quarter of a century but also of the surprising series of changes that have re-shaped Canadian attitudes during that period.

G.W.

## TRANSLATION

ROCH CARRIER'S NOVEL, *Il est par là, le soleil*, which was reviewed in its original French version by Ronald Sutherland in *Canadian Literature* No. 50, has now been translated by Sheila Fischman, under the title of *Is It the Sun, Philibert?* (Anansi, \$2.50 paper, \$6.50 cloth).

G.W.

## ON THE VERGE

\*\*\*\*\* *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume X, 1871 to 1880*. University of Toronto Press, \$20.00. Volume X of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is actually the third volume to come into print, and with its appearance the strategy of the editors becomes evident; an excellent one it is. They are proceeding from two fronts, forward from the beginnings of Canadian history (approximately 1000 AD) and at the same time in both directions from a nodal point round about the date of Confederation, when Canada began to look like a nation. The first parts to appear, Volumes I and II, covered the period between 1000 and 1740, and Volume III, from 1741 to 1770, is in preparation. Volume X, now appearing, covers the decade from 1871 to 1880, and it will be followed by Volume IX, from 1861 to 1870. This means that there is a steady advance from the first pre-national beginnings, and at the same time a solid establishment of the foundations (and founders) of modern Canada, while the editors are clearly allowing time to take care of the twentieth century by not rushing precipitately into the decades that are within approximately living memory; indeed, they announce that they will not proceed beyond 1880 until the intervening decades have been filled in. At the present rate of a volume every two years (Volume I appeared in 1966), this means that a good many who read this note will have passed on and be eligible for inclusion by the time a new generation of editors reaches our decade. Meanwhile the volumes that have appeared already seem such indispensable tools on one's shelves that one can only hope the publication of the rest will be accelerated as far as is compatible with the maintenance of their present excellence.

\*\*\*\*\* J. A. S. EVANS. *Procopius*. Twayne, \$5.50. Somewhat astonishingly, this is the first book written in English on the Byzantine historian Procopius, to whom Gibbon and subsequent historians of the late ancient world were so much indebted. Given the limitations of Twayne's World Authors Series — limitations of size and aim — Professor Evans has done astonishingly well by his subject, providing the kind of general introduction to Procopius and his times that has long been needed, but still conserving enough space in the 160 pages allotted to consider critically Procopius's various works, to weigh the evidence for his having

written the libellous *Secret History* of the reign of Justinian (Evans accepts this as authentic Procopius) and to speculate interestingly on the religious views of Procopius in a time of bitter theological controversy. It is a model of the concise guide to a hitherto uncharted territory.

\*\*\*\* LESLIE H. NEATBY. *The Search for Franklin*. Hurtig, \$7.95. *The Search for Franklin* is a great deal more than its title suggests, for in his admirably concise narrative Dr. Neatby has gone far outside the story of the many expeditions that sought the lost Franklin and his over-equipped flotilla. He begins with accounts of Elizabethan and Jacobean attempts to discover the Northwest Passage, and then leads through Franklin's various Polar journeys to the fatal voyage itself. It is only a third of the way through the book that we come to the mystery of Franklin's disappearance; the remainder is devoted to the great search, the men who undertook it, and the extensions of geographical knowledge which were the oblique dividends of their efforts to trace either Franklin or the relics that would help determine his fate. There are limitations to Dr. Neatby's treatment. We have no thorough reconstruction of what may have happened to Franklin, and little attention is paid to the actual evidence that was discovered. Moreover, those with differing views from his about the most effective forms of Arctic travel will be disappointed with Neatby's tendency to follow Victorian tradition by concentrating on those who searched by sea and giving too little credit to that great pioneer of later Arctic travel, Dr. John Rae, who after all found the first evidence that confirmed the tragic fate of Franklin and his men; Rae's accounts of his travels do not even feature in the bibliography.

\*\*\*\* ROBIN W. WINKS. *The Blacks in Canada: A History*. Yale University Press, \$15.00. Little is known even by Canadians about the black community in this country. Negroes make up about half of one per cent of our population; they are divided among themselves between those who came from the United States and those who came from the West Indies, and even among the "Americans" between the "aristocrats" whose ancestors came with the Loyalists and those whose ancestors came later during the abolitionist campaigns. They have been little persecuted in Canada; in our anti-assimilationist society they have rather been ignored, living as small urban minorities or in rural slums of the

Maritimes. Only during the last few years have we become acutely aware of them as a group who, with few individual exceptions, belong to the poorest stratum of our population. Yet the history of blacks in Canada (never told thoroughly before the volume here noticed) is a long one—dating from the beginning of French colonization—and an extremely interesting one, and Robin Winks has ably informed both Americans and Canadians on the subject in this exhaustive history, whose subject has enough interest and variety to carry on its impetus a halting style and an inordinate preoccupation with dull and petty detail.

\*\*\* G. P. DE T. GLAZEBROOK. *The Story of Toronto*. University of Toronto Press, \$13.75. Sound histories of Canadian towns are rare, perhaps because one has to be something of a local patriot even to conceive such a task, and love of a place, like love of a person, can very easily blur the gaze of the writer and soften his prose. Glazebrook's *The Story of Toronto* is that exception, a good city history, researched long and thoroughly, presented with just the right degree of understatement and written in a good workmanlike manner which makes it as consistently readable as it is abundantly informative. As a history, but also as a study of the personality of Toronto and the collective identity of its inhabitants, it is likely to be unrivalled for long ahead.

\*\*\* DUNCAN PRYDE. *Nunaga: My Land, My Country*. M. G. Hurtig, \$8.95. By rigorous literary standards, Duncan Pryde is not a good writer. The men and women who populate his Arctic landscape talk like dictaphones, and he plants his information with relentless obviousness. Yet for all its irritating clumsiness and contrivance, his narrative of life as a fur trader at the very end of the Old North, in the late 1950's and the 1960's, is intensely interesting, if for no other reason, because as we read it we know that it is very unlikely that any other man will again live that kind of life and write it down. Pryde is one of the last of his kind, and his consciousness of this fact becomes one of the main virtues of his book, which deliberately sets out to record, before it has all passed into unreliable memory, the last phases of the dying Eskimo culture. True, that culture is now dazzling us with a magnificent swan-song of art—the splendid sculptures which as these words are written are being shown in the great Hermitage Museum of Leningrad—but to understand even these works, we need the observer's close

record of true Eskimo life in its final years. In fulfilling that role, *Nunaga*, though it is a far more personal narrative, undoubtedly takes its place beside Fred Bruemmer's splendidly threnodic *Seasons of the Eskimo*.

**\*\* *Creative Canada: A Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-century Creative and Performing Artists*, Vol. I, compiled by the Reference Division, McPherson Library, University of Victoria. University of Toronto Press, \$15.00.** This is a potentially very useful work of reference, hamstrung by an inexplicably eccentric method of selection. It is meant to be an "objective and factual" record, and yet the artists have been chosen — so far as one can see — in deference only to the deities of chance and caprice. Granted that the first volume of this handbook could not adequately cover all twentieth-century Canadian creative artists, a logical division might have been alphabetical, or by particular arts, or by decade of death, or birth, or even geographical locality. The selectors have ignored all these possible logical methods and have chosen a pattern of their own that bewilders the reader with a volume that informs him fully on P. K. Page and Bert Binning and not at all on Irving Layton and Jack Shadbolt; that includes more than a column on the little-known painter, John Christopher Pratt, and nothing on E. J. Pratt. Doubtless in later volumes the omissions will vanish as inexplicably as they have appeared, but the reader will be left with a series of disordered parts through which he will only be able to find his way by means of a cumulative index. One must assume that the compilers have a strong moral conviction that information should not be too easily come by; they may indeed be right.

**\*\* JOHN MALCOLM BRINNIN. *The Sway of the Grand Saloon: A Social History of the North Atlantic*. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$18.95.** John Malcolm Brinnin, a lost Canadian and author of a book — *Dylan Thomas in America* — which many people who knew Thomas found distasteful and unreliable, has now turned to a "popular" form of social history which should make some appeal to those who remember the vanished pleasures of Atlantic crossings in ships like the *Ile de France* and her precursors. Curiously, for a Canadian who comes from the Nova Scotian heartland of the Cunards, Brinnin concentrates almost entirely on the liners that sailed from American ports. His book could have been half as long again and twice as interesting if he had remembered his own country and written of the boats that

came into Montreal and Halifax, of the Furness passenger-cargo boats that crossed the North Atlantic to Newfoundland, and of the whole complex history of the immigrant traffic to Canada, not forgetting the appearance of liners from behind the Iron Curtain as the final act in the romantic drama.

**\*\* *Archives: Mirror of Canada Past*.** Published for the Archives of Canada by the University of Toronto Press, \$7.50. This is a curious volume, originally prepared as a catalogue of an exhibition held to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the Public Archives of Canada, and now made available to the public. For this reason it is not so comprehensive a guide as one could have wished. Its main usefulness is that it will alert many scholars to the extraordinary richness of the collections and to the patent eagerness on the part of the archivists for these collections to be used to the fullest possible extent. Surely there can be no other institution in which the Reading Room stays open for the benefit of insomniac students for every one of the day's twenty-four hours!

**\*\* P. B. WAITE, *Canada 1874-1896: Arduous Destiny*. McClelland & Stewart.** Over the years since Centennial, the Canadian Centenary History has been slowly filling out its list of publications. This is the twelfth volume to appear, and it almost completes the account to the end of the nineteenth century. Apart from a missing volume on New France from 1702-43, the five volumes which now must appear for the series to be ended will all deal with aspects or periods of Canadian history from 1897 onwards. There are obvious disadvantages to the method that has been adopted of chopping the history of the country into chronological chunks, each discussed by a different historian; tone and standard vary and writers are often hard put to it to begin or end gracefully at an arbitrary date. In the case of *Canada 1874-1896*, for example, it is unsatisfactory to pick up with the history of the formation of the CPR at mid-point, though a clearer logic attends the closing of the volume with the election of Laurier to power in 1896. Professor Waite captures well the gamy flavour of Canadian politics in these decades so shortly after Confederation, but his story has no very clear structure, which may indeed reflect the confused directions of the times, but which hardly makes for sustained interest in reading.

G.W.

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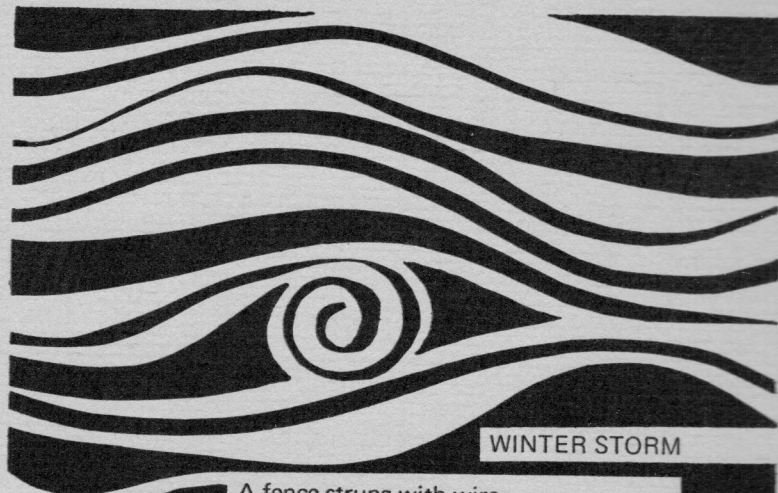
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## WINTER STORM

A fence strung with wire  
sings thin in the wind  
sliding small dunes round stumps.  
Brown tufts blade-sharp against white  
burst in the cold  
small detonations of silence  
within the screech.

These slide past my eyes  
fixed on the road's black grooves  
thick parallels  
cutting to the horizon's circle —  
behind me blue deep as black,  
in front blue light dissolving  
to a bruise  
as the snow lets fly  
at the land preserved  
in amber drained to ice.

And solid light breaks down to blur  
turning my flesh transparent  
a sliver of brittle crystal

I  
blind at the storm centre.

By Peter Stevens

**Hudson's Bay Company**

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