
A VIEW OF CANADIAN CRITICISM

By GEORGE WOODCOCK

"The routine work of criticism is to interpret, elucidate and evaluate our literature, and in so doing to define, defend and expound the tradition. Not the literary tradition solely, but the whole cultural complex from which literature is one specific outgrowth, and which includes the tradition of thought and of belief." D. S. Savage.¹

MY own view of criticism is close enough to that of D. S. Savage to make me accept his statement as a sufficiently accurate short definition of the function of a critic within a given literary tradition. And thus, in considering the possibility or desirability of what one might call a Canadian school of criticism it seems to me necessary to decide first of all whether there is in fact anything that can reasonably be described as a Canadian literary tradition.

"A Canadian literary tradition"—the phrase has an ominous suggestion of nationalist feeling which I think it is necessary to dispel. Political nationalism has little positively to do with the cultural traditions of peoples. Italian and German literature and painting and music flourished, when those countries were loose collections of small sovereign states and free cities, with a splendour that was denied the arid deserts of nationalism under Mussolini and Hitler; Irish literature began to lose its richness of quality when political separatism weakened that bond of cross-fertilisation with English movements which had given it vigour and variety. Nationalist movements, indeed, can often frustrate and paralyse cultural traditions; never are they Frankensteins enough to create what can only spring out of the organic richness of individual and social life. Yet, even when we have put aside the pseudo-mythology of nationalism, it remains true that peoples and regions have their own distinctive literary and cultural traditions and attitudes, conditioned by shared language and habitat and historical experience.

At the same time, it is axiomatic that, at its highest level of appeal, literature is also universal; then it deals in myths and images and thoughts which pierce like cosmic radiation through the barriers of language and environment so that the educated Brahmin or the Peruvian can find the adventures of Ulysses or the sorrows of Hecuba almost as real as they were to the antique Greek. Yet this universally appealing literature does not seek to deny its own cultural source. On the contrary, it appeals most widely when the writer reaches most deeply into the life

of his own place and time, and finds the universal where his spiritual roots plunge into their native soil. It is impossible to imagine *The Divine Comedy* outside the context of the early Italian renaissance, or *War and Peace* being produced by any but a man who had entered fully into the tragedy and richness of Russian existence. The cosmopolitan artist is as legendary as the Centaur; writers are dependent, not only on their immediate and temporary environment, but even more on their origins. In a sense, the great expatriates have merely proved the elasticity of their native cultures. Petrarch in Avignon does not cease to be an Italian poet. Henry James at Rye remains the American abroad. And in our own day W. H. Auden is still an exile in America from the English Thirties. Even men who have assimilated elements of foreign cultures so assiduously as Conrad and T. S. Eliot are never wholly naturalised; the author of *Under Western Eyes* is still at heart a Pole translating in English the spiritual struggles of his own people, and the cosmopolitan erudition that encases *The Waste Land* like a layer of aspic is really an aspect of American culture which, like the Dublin culture of fifty years before, has intellectual and physical expatriation as one of its experiential patterns.

However, in denying the possibility of a cosmopolitan artist, I am not suggesting that cultures are unreceptive of external influences. On the contrary, I suggest that where cosmopolitanism does exist is in the continual and necessary interplay of various traditions upon each other. Just as excessive inbreeding is biologically weakening, so an abnormally isolated society will become culturally stagnant, repeating itself over the centuries with decreasing meaningfulness, as happened in Egypt. From this point of view, the past century has tended, with interruptions, towards a steady increase in cultural cosmopolitanism. The influence of movements like Romanticism, of individual writers like Dostoevsky and Flaubert and James, have spread far beyond their native lands and have stimulated thought and writing throughout the Western world. Yet in literature, as in biology, a new strain proves invigorating only when the soil is propitious, and the ultimate form of a plant depends on its native nutriment. So those writers who try to mould themselves directly on foreign models produce only an alien *pastiche* (the ineptitudes of English poetasters who sedulously aped Eliot and Pound provide an example); foreign influences operate most fruitfully on those writers who are able to assimilate them in terms of their own culture and their own environment.

Basically, indeed, any culture depends on original environment, on the place and time in which a man's nature is formed and his early experience is enacted. Travel may ripen a writer, as it ripened Byron; exile may drive him to reckon agonisingly with himself, as it drove Lawrence. But neither travel nor exile made either of these men anything but English writers, wholly within the English tradition.

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These observations lead one to consider the formation of new cultures, which appear usually by the process of colonisation, when experience is radically changed and the link with a parent culture is broken. At times colonisation takes men to a relatively similar environment, and then the continuation of intercourse with the mother country may lead to the mere extension of its culture, as in the case of most of the Greek Mediterranean colonies during classical antiquity. But where a pronouncedly different environment is encountered, a new culture may begin to grow; thus, in the ambience of a decaying Egyptian civilisation, Alexandria preserved the Greek language but produced its own characteristic forms of literature and philosophy.

A similar process has taken place in the former English and Spanish colonies. The first generation of immigrants carried with them the culture they had learnt in youth, and, though their work may have been enriched by new experiences, they remained fundamentally Englishmen or Spaniards appreciating a new landscape or dealing with strange problems, Grand Tourists detained by circumstance at one spot in their peregrinations or nostalgic exiles seeking to reproduce home in the wilderness. It has been with the later generations that countries like the United States and Mexico have produced their own societies, their own natal environments, and, by implication, their own cultures, in which the flow of new immigrants from the Old World has acted as a stimulus rather than a moulding influence. After the first generation, the process of transformation from a colonial and dependent to a regional and integral culture begins, first in the development of independent forms of what are generally delimited as the "creative arts", and later in the growth of a critical literature which, as Savage suggests, defines, defends and expounds the new tradition. Poe and Hawthorne, with the larval vestiges of European romanticism clinging to their wings, precede characteristically American authors like Whitman and Howells; before the death of Howells, writers like H. L. Mencken were already laying the foundations of a criticism that

would assess American literature in its own terms as well as in relation to other traditions. The coming of American literature to independent maturity in fact coincides historically with the rise of American criticism, and the juxtaposition is not accidental.

In fact, while criticism as a self-conscious literary medium is characteristic of the maturation of literatures in our time, it has never been absent in some form or another from live and growing cultures. In past ages, when spoken verse and the drama were the most prominent literary forms—the eras of Athenian tragedy, of the Elizabethan and Restoration theatres, of the Provençal troubadours and the Celtic bards, the relation between an acute and informed audience and the dramatist or poet paralleled the relation between critics and creative writers in other times, and it is significant that English criticism arose out of the discussions of *aficionados* of the play in the theatres and coffee houses of Restoration London. The early discourses of Ryner and Dennis and Dryden were attempts to answer and systematise the coffee house arguments on dramatic art. But drama is enacted on the public stage; it is a declamatory art demanding and living by the direct participation of a live audience. Other forms of writing, and particularly prose forms, are communicated almost wholly through the written page, and the controversies on form and content which they arouse can also reach the interested audience only, for the most part, through books and periodicals. Thus the refinement—though not the emergence—of a self-conscious and comprehensive literary tradition (as distinct from a limited dramatic tradition) is usually coterminous with the appearance of a developed critical literature. It is appropriate that, after the formative and exuberant eloquence of Jacobean writing, the first great master of disciplined English prose should also have been the first great English critic—John Dryden.

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Now we can turn to the two questions which seem to be basic to this essay. Firstly, is there such a thing as a Canadian literature? And, secondly, is there in Canada anything approaching that *sine qua non* of a self-conscious literary tradition, a developed critical movement? To the first question I think one can answer that there is a genuinely Canadian literature, which is at present in that emergent state which characterised American writing in the middle of the last century.¹ The dom-

1. I make this as a descriptive rather than a qualitative statement.

inant figures of early writing in Canada, from Goldsmith to Lampman and Carman and Service, to Roberts and Grove and even Leacock, were typically colonial writers, with roots in the lost "Old Country", importing the moods and images of the English literary culture—and a little of the American—to deal with Canadian experience. Today this situation is changing rapidly. The second and third generation writers are starting from the basis of native environment in a developed Canadian society. It is true that Canadian writing is still being enriched by the work of many men and women from abroad, like Malcolm Lowry and Patrick Anderson and James Wreford. But in the work of writers like E. J. Pratt, A. M. Klein, Hugh MacLennan, Early Birney, Dorothy Livesay, A. J. Smith, Hugh Kenner, Douglas le Pan, Ethel Wilson and many others, it has taken on the rough outline of an emerging literary tradition, admittedly with no major achievements as yet, but rooted in Canadian life and seeing the world sensitively through an experiential pattern that is distinctively Canadian. In certain important respects, this tradition still shows the signs of immaturity. There is the tendency, typical of an insecurely rooted literary movement, for disproportionate number of writers to be concerned with external nature at the expense of a proper consideration of human character and destiny. And there is the absence of a body of Canadian critical writing in any way comparable to our poetry and fiction.

I do not suggest that good critical writing is not being done anywhere in Canada today. But the best of it, like that of Northrop Frye, is outside the Canadian literary movement; it is work which belongs to the corpus of English academic exegesis. Of criticism which, in the full sense, seeks to evaluate Canadian writing in a creative manner and to relate it, not only to Canadian experience, but also to a universal criterion, there is almost none. Reviewers exist in plenty, making *ad hoc* judgments of individual Canadian books—judgments which are rarely more than superficial. And there is also a team of industrious expositors who have produced a number of books on Canadian writing which are informative, after the manner of literary histories, but which slide into easy generalisation as soon as they turn towards critical judgment. These studies provide some of the factual raw material with which the genuine critic can work, but they lack both the analytic approach and the philosophically creative insight which make criticism something more active than mere commentary.

In a recent Fighting Words broadcast from Toronto a number of writers trailed their wounded pride across the stage and complained that the critics—by which they meant the reviewers in Canadian newspapers and periodicals—dealt too harshly with native books, and appeared to be fixed in their idea that nothing good could come out of their own country. My impression has been somewhat different, and I feel that a writer in *Queen's Quarterly* who recently described a moderately good Canadian novel as "perfect of its kind" (a meaningless *cliche* since perfection is a non-existent quality in human relations) was nearer to the routine treatment of Canadian books; they tend too often to be accepted with uncritical kindness of the "local boy (or girl) makes good" kind. But, whether these reviewers speak too harshly or too well, I think there is no doubt that they use a kind of special treatment which is critically invalid. Even writers who are able to discourse intelligently and capably on non-Canadian writings will act like men with hot potatoes in their hands when they are faced with a Canadian book. They have clearly evolved no critical approach based on Canadian experience, and yet they feel that merely general literary criteria are not enough. Accordingly, they deal with the native author as something special, a beast to which known zoological standards do not apply. The sophisticated act like a schoolmaster who is so afraid of showing favour to his own son that he gives him more than his share of punishment. The less sophisticated—whom I think are in the majority—feed the author peanuts of praise. Neither gives him the treatment he deserves on his own merits and in relation to his experience.

In other words, there is at present, to all intents and purposes, no creative school of Canadian criticism. At the same time, it seems evident that Canadian writing has reached that stage in its movement towards self-conscious identity when the creative function of the critic as a unifying and defining element in the emergent tradition becomes necessary. Many Canadian writers have attained a sophistication in which they are conscious of working in isolation, and that isolation is not merely a question of geography, of men working in small towns strung across the CPR or in cities which are too small or too culturally undeveloped to provide the rewards in money and prestige or the organised literary life of capitals like London and New York. It is an isolation that springs from a feeling that they are no longer colonial dependents of English or American traditions, but that at the same time there is no community of Canadian writing, that there is no evident unity in all the apparently

scattered paths which they and their fellow writers are taking. The sense of unity which they are conscious of lacking can only be provided by a developed criticism which is able to evaluate Canadian literature in terms of native experience and also of the wider currents of thought and life that represent the universal in world literature.

At this stage I do not think it possible—even if it were desirable—to conceive anything like a group of Canadian New Critics, devoted to the task of close textual analysis. The Canadian critic, when he emerges, will have a wider task to embrace; he will have to be something of a psychologist, something of a sociologist, something of a philosopher, something of a mythologist, besides having a developed consciousness of formal values and an imagination that is both creative and receptive. He will be concerned with the peculiar nature of Canadian experience, what makes the temper of our life—despite so many superficial resemblances—essentially different from the American or the British, and how this regional pattern of living and thinking and reacting affects the work of Canadian writers. But he will also be aware of trends in other countries, and will have to consider in what relation life and literature in Canada stand to the world pattern. He will have to delve into the past for the unifying myths and probe into the future for the sense of direction. But he will also not lose sight of the fact that within the culture each writer is inalienably an individual, with his own psychology and his own reaction to experience. This experience, which includes language and the whole complex of natural and social and cultural influences to which he is subjected, will mark the writer off as a Canadian—or an Englishman or a Russian—but the spark that gives his work life is that of the unique personality dealing with those problems of thought and morality which are universal.

Such a critic as I have foreseen is not likely to spring like Pallas fully armed from the head of Zeus. Rather, he will emerge when there is a climate of critical enquiry, a group of people interested in developing a critical approach to Canadian writing. Such a group can only manifest itself if it has the vehicles of expression, and so far these are few and scanty. Canadian publishers are receptive to expository volumes—half history and half comment—on Canadian literature, because these may have a wide sale in universities and schools; it is doubtful whether they would risk the small circulation of more genuinely critical volumes. The hypothetical critical movement of the future must therefore express itself through periodicals.

And here also the field is not abundant. Newspaper reviewing, even at its best, is too topical and too brief to allow criticism in depth, and the literary periodicals in Canada are too few and limited in their scope to provide the necessary room for development. Northern Review, Queen's Quarterly, Dalhousie Review, Canadian Forum and other similar papers are not exclusively or even primarily concerned with literary criticism, and it seems to me that a Canadian Journal devoted specifically to the critical consideration of native and world literature in a goal to be aimed at, a minimum beginning. For now, more than ever before, we should foster that critical spirit which can bring Canadian writing out of the hesitations of adolescence and into the self-consciousness of maturity.